



THE DAY AFTER

Supporting Democratic Transition In Syria

# So I'm not Kept in the Shadows

Oral Memory: Syrian Women Survivors of Detention

Lama Kannout



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2019

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The Day After organization (TDA) is a Syrian organization working in support of the democratic transition in Syria, with a focus on the following points: Rule of law, transitional justice, security sector reform, design of electoral systems and election of a Constituent Assembly, constitutional design, economic reform and social policies.

Cover: Sara Khayat

The Day After - Istanbul, Turkey

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In 2017, she published A book-length research titled “In the Core or on the Margin: Syrian Women’s Political Participation,” and in 2019 a book-length research titled "Gender Sensitive Transitional Justice in Syria." Furthermore, Ms. Kannout presented several papers on various topics such as the democratic change in Syria, the principles of gender-sensitive constitution, gender-sensitive electoral system, citizenship, and many other related topics.

Additionally, Ms. Kannout has co-founded and managed a number of civil society organizations concerned with democracy and human rights.

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## Introduction

History based on narration and oral testimony gains importance during revolutions, armed conflicts and wars, bearing witness to history and forming a basis for documentation to confront falsifications by a tyrannical authority seeking to obscure the facts of its tyranny and multiple violations of human rights. Therefore, it is essential to be aware of the importance of spoken histories as a complementary source that identifies or corrects facts documented by traditional sources in the absence of documents for various reasons, which sometimes necessitates the reliance on testimonies and oral accounts as a main source of historical documentation, achieved with the efforts of documenters of verbal accounts and the insistence of witnesses on reporting and bringing facts into the open, shedding light on women's struggles for freedom, equality and social justice.

Spoken history is no less important than written documents, as it preserves aspects of history and the stories of peoples and human societies, and helps build a wealth of knowledge and science around the unrecorded histories of environments, conflicts and human transformations, making it necessary to preserve and use spoken history when writing the history of human societies on scientific foundations.

Since the Assad family came to power almost 47 years ago, researchers have had limited access to resources. Field work remains almost impossible under the Assad regime and as long as the country is at war; thus, NGOs are busy collecting videos, medical records and eyewitness reports on human rights violations, with future justice measures in mind, although personal testimonies and published accounts are difficult to find.

The Day After has and is still making efforts to achieve justice for all Syrians through its work and projects, including the 'Survivors' project, out of the need to communicate their voices to international committees and organizations concerned with documenting, to bring criminal cases or provide them with assistance after everything they suffered during and after detention. The organization undertook the initiative to form a team to work with detention survivors, in order to enable them and activate their role, and has shared with them developments regarding the file of the detainees. The 'Survivors' project includes the stories of 27 women inside and outside Syria, from among which 11 were selected for this book.

The objectives of the 'Survivors' assistance project are:

- To work to empower and activate the role of survivors of detention.
- To build confidence among them and combine their efforts to support their case and that of detainees in general.
- To cooperate with international committees and partner organizations concerned with documentation.
- To provide psychosocial support to survivors from partner bodies.
- To document the stories of survivors and their testimonies within this book as historical documentation.

Through its various activities, the project has:

- Conducted awareness-raising sessions on human rights and international law, as well as on sexual and gender-based violence.
- Conducted awareness sessions on mechanisms and international committees working on documenting violations and building cases, and Syrian bodies and teams formed by groups of victims and their families.

- Conducted training on the concept of transitional justice and mechanisms of accountability, advocacy and team-building, in addition to defining the concept of spoken history and its importance.

The book documents the experiences of survivors who participated in workshops and trainings organized by The Day After, and these stories represent part of women's experiences with political and social violence and other forms of violence. Each of their experiences has its own specific and different effects. The book was limited to 11 stories only for several reasons; most notably the nature of psychological suffering and the distress of the survivors, as well as the difficulty of movement from their various locations, and their fear of being named in their testimonies lest any of their relatives are arrested or questioned by security forces in Syria, and their fear of risks or consequences if their names were disclosed.







## Hostages<sup>1\*</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author's interview with Nargis (a nickname) via WhatsApp, on February 10, 2019, duration of the interview: four hours.

\*Cover by: Diyala Zada



My name is Narjes from Zabadani in Damascus suburbs, I am thirty-nine years old, and I studied history in the faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University. I worked as a teacher for ten years, I got suspended abusively after my detention, I have two kids, my daughter Lojain thirteen-years-old, and my son Osama eleven-years-old. I live now in Turkey with my kids and my mother. I got divorced from my husband after; my release and travel to Turkey because he kept asking me to go back to Syria for reconciliation with the regime, but I refused due to the injustice and torture I had been through in jail. I had no activity in the beginning of the revolution because I was employed, and I was committed to my family tasks towards my husband and kids. My husband and his family were with the regime, whilst my parents were with the opposition. I didn't witness the shelling and siege that Zabadani suffered from, since my family I moved to Bloudan, between June and July 2012 and I continued working, I didn't even communicate with my brother who was with opposition and supported the revolution because of fear for myself.

### **Al-Mujtahid hospital:**

In 2014 the situation of Zabadani was extremely dire. The regime was pushing to regain control over it again, and my mother wanted to check on our house in Zabadani but she got injured when mortar shell landed on it, in May 14, 2014. In that period the regime was taking hostages from families of the wanted to force them to surrender. My sister and I were transferring my mother to be treated in one of Damascus hospitals, and while passing the checkpoint adjacent to Zabadani, some of the regime agents told the checkpoint troops that we are the family of my wanted brother, who was a fighter with the Free Syrian Army, and they asked them to be detain us for leverage.

I wanted to transfer my mother to a private hospital in Damascus, because in Zabadani there was one field hospital with no equipment to treat my mother who fell into a coma. But the soldiers on that checkpoint insisted to take her to al-Mujtahid hospital. It didn't cross my mind that it was a governmental hospital with a security point stationed inside.

We entered al-Mujtahid hospital on May 14, 2014, it was a military barrack for the big number of agents deployed within it, because some soldiers were treated there. From the moment we arrived I felt watched, and the human face was absent from the hospital. My mother was taken to the ICU unite, my and I sister were left in one room and the door was locked, we were held as hostages.

It was two square meters with only one bed, no toilet or a water tap. I asked the security why they were keeping us in the room, he said: "nothing, orders came to keep you here, and you have your mobile phone" so I asked him: "How will we go out to the toilet?" he answered: "This is my phone number, call me and I will come and let you out." But he didn't answer his phone, and when he answers he keeps us waiting for ours to go out to the toilet.

I couldn't wash my face, they brought us food but I was not capable of eating, I was afraid my mother might die and afraid that if she died they won't inform us, I was allowed to visit her in the ICU unite for five minutes per day, and we remained like this for fifteen days. Then my mother was transferred from the intensive care to thoracic section, due to shell effects and to pull out the gas that she inhaled when injured. She needed catheter and lung cleansing, and we stayed like this for twenty-days until they decided to bring my mother to our room.

When my mother woke up from her coma we knew that she was half paralyzed in her lower part, where fragments hit her spinal cord and she became incapable of moving at all. They put a urinary catheter for her, the three of us stayed locked in a room.

There was no life necessities, and I dreamed for six-months and twenty-days to take a bath, it was my worst days, and it felt harder than my stay in detention centers.

I used to phone call my kids, I was crying and they cried, I couldn't see them, and it got worse because they were left with their old grandmother and their aunt.

My mother became disabled and needed help, cleaning, caring, and assistance. The security didn't care about her medical condition, and I don't know how she handled this situation.

Visits weren't forbidden, I called my university friend, told her my story, and in every time she visited me, she washed my clothes, brought me food and plastic bags which I used for emergencies when the door won't open for us to use the toilet.

Besides our room, in the vascular section, there was a room where young men were locked inside it like us, the hospital was a security post, where injured men are "vetted," and even if the man is injured they lock him up if one of his relatives is wanted to them.

The agent allowed me to use the bathroom twice a day, where men were deprived of. I thought at the beginning that there was a bathroom in their room, but bad smells that came out when their door opens explained to me that there was no bathroom in their room.

Our room had a window to the street, it was isolated where no movement was close to it, and the men's room was next to ours, and farther from the movement. Sounds of screaming and beating came from it, where these sounds scared us and made us more curious about what's happening in it.

My sister and I used to listen if a sound came out from the room, and use the time of going out to use the bathroom to peep, and we looked between the small boulder between the floor and the door, where we used to see their military shoes while they're approaching, and we heard the conversation between them and the men, and once we heard them while beating them, we used to take care of the smallest details, and we had curiosity to know if there is anyone we know between those men!

In one night at two in the morning we woke up on screaming sound, and on other times we woke up at three in the morning, they were beating one of the men badly, and the man was saying to the security point leader: "I swear I was going to bring medicine Sir." On the next day, they beat him again.

We became accustomed that at nine and a half o'clock the agent will open our door to go out to the bathroom. One time my sister and I walked slowly, while returning back to the room, and the door to the men's detention room was open and we saw a pool of blood. When the agent noticed me looking at this scene he hurried to close their door, and pushed us in quickly and locked our door, but he didn't lock their door, so me and my sister looked from the space beneath the door to see what's happening, we saw the cleaner walking while approaching to clean the room. The water was yellow and the smell of blood filled the place, and we heard the agent telling the cleaner: "go ahead, put those nice mixtures you have so it would smell nice." He meant the cleaning products, then he started laughing.

I spotted the man how was beaten by them, who didn't pass twenty-five years' old, and I think he was dying, food trays were going out empty, nine or ten trays except for one that wasn't touched. I used to say to my sister that this tray is for the guy who they beat, and maybe he's dying.

On the day after at three o'clock on twenty-eight of Ramadan 2014. They moved us to another room, I asked the agent to open our room locked door saying: "I want to use the bathroom," so one of the men felt that our door was open and knocked on their door and told the agent: "open the door" the agent asked him "what do you want?" so the man repeated his request and said: "open, open," I didn't hear what they were saying when their door was opened, but the agent told me nervously: "you and your

sister come on quickly."

We were pushed quickly inside our room and the door was locked, then the men's door was also locked. Where the head of the security came and stood by our door and one of the agents told him: "he's dead sir." We smelled "Alcohol," it seemed like they poured it on his face, so the agent said: "he didn't wake up," probably he died earlier, so the leader said: "bring Issa the "cleaning man," to move him to the fridge," they actually brought the stretcher and moved him to the fridge.

Whenever I asked the agent when are we released? He answers me: if there is nothing on you, you will be released, it's a matter of time, and I used to argue him always: if my brother is guilty what's my fault, but they couldn't care less!

After six months and twenty days, at two in the morning, the agent moved us to another room in the thoracic section in al-Mujtahid hospital with a bathroom in it. Thank god the situation got better, we could shower and use the bathroom in the time we need, but as a result for the long time we spent in that room I suffered from a urinalysis disorder. We stayed in this room for four months. The whole period we spent in the hospital was ten months and twenty days then we were released, our life was the worst through them.

### **Al-Khatib Branch:**

On April 08, 2015, they told us that we will be moved to al-Khatib Branch, and told us: "Our stay in the branch will be for few days." I said to myself "thank god freedom is coming." They asked us to leave our belongings in the hospital, so we left my mother's "air mattress." Since we arrived at the branch they carried my mother on a plastic chair, and then took us underground to a group dorm.

The dorm was filled with girls, they were around thirty girls, who were surprised by my paralyzed mother in detention, and they started asking me about our arrest reasons, so I told them that we didn't do anything, we are here because my brother is wanted by the regime. On the next day of our stay in the al-Khatib Branch my mother's condition got worse, I was begging the jailor to give me a foam mattress, to raise my mother up a little from the floor, but he refused, and after five days I was called for investigation, my mother's body turned red and got infected from lying on the floor. It was a formal investigation, I was not accused of any charges, the investigator's questions were about my family and relatives, and I told him: "I am married eleven years ago, and have no activity at all, and kept repeating in front of him, what is my fault?," I was afraid of torture because I saw the girls after they investigated them, bleeding, they were beaten and couldn't walk after because of their swollen feet. Despite the threatening and the bad talk they heard, where nothing from what I mentioned happened to me, I have been investigated blindfolded and sitting on the floor. When they removed my blindfold from my face, I saw the detective sitting on a coach, and ordered me to stamp my fingerprints on three white papers. When they finished my investigation they took my sister interrogation but never my mother.

We stayed for a month in the group dorm, where the red color on my mother's body turned to black, and the skin on her body sides started to open, "lying down ulcers," a doctor visited her and opened the ulcers by a blade so the pus melted, and her back and one of her sides bones were visible to us. She started to sleep on one side only. Here the doctor felt sorry for her and brought a black tire, filled it with air and asked her to raise her side off the floor in order not to get infected.

My mother was exhausted and couldn't really move, due to lack of physical treatment her whole body failed. Even the urinary catheter used to stop working so they brought

a nurse from the Red Crescent hospital since it's close to the Khatib Branch, who changed it every twelve days and sometimes twenty days.

I was using diapers for my mother. We spent all our money on it, Mayada who was detained since a year and a half, and had ten thousand SP with her, once said to the jailor: "we spent our money on pads, get us pads," so they started bringing three-four pads bags for all detainees, but for my mother she had urinary catheter but I used to cut the dipper into two sections and sometimes use the bread bags.

Through this period, we used to hear children's voices in the other dorms, the next day afternoon we heard noise and crying, while the jailor saying the released women name, and the rest their children were taken from them to the SOS orphanage, they, and their children's screaming and crying sounds were very loud, where the oldest was ten years old.

Eight women left in the room, then the prison became quite, after that an agent came and read eleven-woman name including mine, my sister, and my mother and asked us to go out, I thought they will release us, but they took us to the room were the women who took their children from, they were from Maydaa village in Damascus suburbs, and we became nineteen women in the dorm.

In this month we spent, new women entered and others left. Where on the other hand there was a room in-front of the solitary cells, where girls came out from each ten days to the yard, with bile faces. They were around thirteen women, I asked women around me: "who are these girls?" so they told me they are captives arrested for negotiations and exchanges, it was clear that they have been in prison for so long.

When we were transferred to that room I knew from the women that the jailor said that we were on the exchange file with the Ghouta area, we were nineteen women in this room, and thirteen women in the small room were on the exchange file. We stayed like this for seven months, the door won't open and no one entered. My mother's condition became extremely bad and the smell of her wounds pus became annoying and embarrassing. I used to buy diapers for her from my savings in the prison deposit box, but I was worried that it would run out soon. With me in the room was a sixty-six-year-old lady from Harasta, she told me: "don't be scared and don't worry I have money you can use to buy diapers." The lady was the oldest in the room, and the youngest was a fifteen-years-old girl, born in 2000, a bride from Maydaa area in Ghouta. She and her mother were arrested after their home was stormed by regime forces. Her husband, and mother in law were killed in front of her while she was hiding in one of the house corners, she begged them not to kill her, so they brought her as a captive.

The walls of our room were made with a very bad cement, rough, old, and full of holes, where the bathroom was full of rats and we were frightened to enter it. We used to cry and scream when we see them and when we tell the jailor he replies: let them eat you. Cockroaches were crawling on our faces, and we cleaned the room daily but in vain. We got lice and scabies and helped each other to remove the lice. Even the blankets they gave us with were soaked in men blood, so we washed them to cover with.

The jailor used to kick the food tray with his leg so it can pass through the space under the door.

Desperate to know our destiny, we used to go on hunger strikes. We were not accused with any charge, and our presence in the detention was because one of our family members whom supported the revolution. Our first meal was at four or five afternoon, and the second between one-and-a-half and two in the morning. One time we lost our nerves and rejected the first day meals, and we ate some bread crumbs we kept. We convinced ourselves that we are eating biscuit, and we continued the strike in the second day, and on the time of the second meal in the morning a colonel kicked the

door of our cell with his foot and entered, and he started cursing us: “you dogs, your brothers have no honor, shut up, and eat shit, if your men had any honor they wouldn’t let you reach this far and get here.”

He was trying to convince us that our husbands, brothers, and fathers were the reason of our detention, not the regime, and I tried to talk but the prison director told me: “especially you eat shit and shut up.” So I kept silence, he was cursing Zahran Alloush since most of the women are from Ghouta, and concluded his words: “she that won’t eat has no honor” and he looked at me before leaving and said: “you, if I want to punish you for what your brother did, I will put you in the swimming suit and leave you in front of the detainees.” Mothers started to ask him about their children that were taken from them, and others started asking why they are punished for their husbands, and brothers’ behavior. He replied: “your kid’s life now is better than the one you gave them, you and their fathers are terrorists, they are eating, and sleeping in beds.”

Honestly, we were afraid of his threats when he talked about honor so we ate since he saw us through cameras installed in the room recording us day and night.

We heard terrifying stories from the women detainees, some stories we heard from the small room where the captives were kept, and others when we gathered with them in Kafar Sousah where we were deposited before they transferred us to Adra prison. They told us that the officer cut one woman’s mouth when she asked about her destiny, and her children’s fate and another was moved to the solitary cell, and other was beaten in his office. They were all threatened after their hunger strike and he told them: “I will let ten strong men come over and rape you if you won’t eat” he threw them with food trays and tomato sauce, and after their honor was threatened they ate.

We stayed like this for five months and we stopped the strikes, and the most important thing for us was to leave with our honor, and we put our faith in God.

We were devastated, sometimes we eat, and sometimes we don’t, sometimes we play simple games to help pass the time, sometimes we used to dance, sing, and cry, we looked like crazy people. We kept waiting the day of our release, until the prison director came one day at eight o’clock in the morning and said: “we will take you out in four groups,” I came out in the last group on November 28, 2015. We left of the big and small cells in accordance to the list of names they receive. We thought were going home, they tied our hands with plastic cuffs, received our belongings, and were taken to a bus that fits twenty passengers, where the officer threatened my mother by saying: “if you say that you’re in pain or paralyzed I will take you back to the Khatib Branch. You will only say that your legs are hurting,” they put her in a plastic chair and carried her to the bus, so I asked him, and his boss to untie my hands to help her because she can’t walk, and they did.

I don’t know exactly the name of the place they took us to, maybe to the military police, which is a place in al-Mazzeah area, close to the Faculty of Arts and after the university of higher education. They delivered us to the branch, and they had our ID cards, and mobile phones. I heard two agents talking to each other when they saw my paralyzed mother, one of them was saying: “who’s the son of bitch who arrested a case like this.” At the beginning he didn’t believe that she’s paralyzed so they ask her to stand up and walk, she told him that she can’t, so one of them told her: “auntie hold me like if I am your son,” And carried her.

We stayed there for four hours, then they took us to Kafar Sousah police station and left us in custody, before sending us to Adra prison. Here we didn’t belong to the security anymore but to the police, so one told us that: “sometimes cases remain here for a couple of days, but for the sake of your mother’s condition we will try to release you tomorrow morning.” My mother’s sides were still open with pus coming out from them, wherein al-Khatib Branch they didn’t use any creams for her, they only used sanitizers and changed the gauze every four days.

On the next day they took us to Adra prison.

### **Adra prison:**

We were surprised when we entered Adra prison with the amount of women who were transferred to it from all branches. They took us into the fifth section after they took our belongings. Colonel Imad Suleiman was surprised by my mother's condition and he was informed that they had previously brought the senile, insane and sick woman. They took us to the fifth section to the third room. Some of the women who spent a long time became "daughters of prison." Their morals and hearts are harsh, few of them have compassionate hearts. They are usually afraid of women coming from security branches where they have lice, their clothes are old and have nothing, but for them, they have been in prison for a long time, their clothes are clean and their parents visit them regularly. Our tragic state was obvious, we slept on the floor, or on military blankets, but they slept on beds.

I had no money, no one visited us since Zabadani and Madaya were under heavy siege. Some of the detainees told me that the judge would release me. They asked me how long I stayed in detention, the period was eight months in al-Khatib Branch and eleven months in al-Mujtahid Hospital, almost a year and seven months. They were like judges analyzing and explaining to me the reasons of their long stay in detention. After twelve days, the colonel came to check "count of women detainees and then locking them in a cell until it's time to go out to the yard." He told me that tomorrow we will go to the judge in al-Mazzeah counter-terrorist court. I asked him how we would take my mother: "I will try not to take her," but her attendance was a must, and the next day at eight o'clock in the morning we wore the penal blue uniform, and they brought a blanket for my mother, so my sister, I and four other detainees carried her and put her in the bus. Our file was with the file of the thirteen detainees (female captives exchange file), whom transferred from al-Khatib Branch, they tied us each two women together, before seeing the judge in the counter-terrorism court. People and lawyers looked at us like we are criminals, their looks were terrible, and we started to cry.

They put my mother on the "staircase" where a person is arranging the names. We entered to see the judge, and his name was: Hossam Eddin Makhlof, a member of the ruling family. He asked me, "Where is .....?" I replied: "I do not know." He said: "according to your file, five years ago you left the country and you do not know anything about him." I said, "yes sir, and what does that mean?" and asked him, "What is my fault!" He said to me, "it's not your fault, and you're suspended," I began to cry, and my sister entered after me and saw me crying, she said: "what's wrong?" I told her: "suspended," and I said to myself: "enough" I lost hope in everything and got desperate from life. I looked at Damascus, and al-Mazzeah where I studied, the people walking in the streets, and I told myself: "Oh God, what is my fault? Why is this happening with me?" The thirteen girls who stood before the judge three of them were released and the rest suspended! Including me, my sister and my mother.

I went back to the prison depressed and hopeless. The detainees did not believe that we were back and thought that I am hiding something. They told me to submit a release request so that I could know what are my charges. When Tuesday came and I requested a release and when the response came the girls rushed towards it, to know my charges. On the paper was written criminal restrain, so they did not believe it because it was dated from six months to one-year and two-months. I said "I do not know, maybe the detention period in the hospital was not included."



We stayed for five months, where my mother's condition improved, and the doctor in Adra prison started putting bandages and used medicines and skin repair creams. They brought her an "air mattress." And while we were there, we were visited by the Syrian Red Crescent committee, maybe someone told them about my mother's condition. So they asked us: "Do you need anything?" So I asked for a wheelchair and an "air mattress" and they asked the women in the cell to help us take care of my mother. My brother did not know that we were still alive, he was told that we died under torture, and sometimes he was negotiated to surrender himself in exchange for our release, but he refused, and he considered us martyrs. He won't surrender himself. For hearing the sound of so much torture in al-Khatib Branch I used to say: "Oh god, on your hands, but not on theirs," meaning, to make our death come naturally, and not killed by them.

The detainees used to close their ears so they won't hear this torture, beating, and abusive talk. Torture begins at eight o'clock in the afternoon until two o'clock in the morning. The screams of the tormentors continued, and we were trembling from fear, and when the tortured detainee says, "oh god," the jailor would increase his torture, and curse both his God and religion.

In prison we needed money to buy supplies for my mother. We met an old woman who was in contact with her son, who was wanted and living under siege in al-Zabadani. Her son was my brother's friend. She told him our story and said to him: "They are from this house. So try to communicate with their family, they are in bad condition, and in need of money," and he actually did give us one of a number to contact.

I called this number and it was my brother's pharmacist friend who answered me, I said to him: "peace on you, I am the sister of your friend, talking to you from the Adra prison." He said, "Are you sure?" And he was very happy. I explained to him my situation and the situation of my mother. I told him, "I want to speak to my brother" I was not afraid and said to myself: "let them do whatever they want," but he was not around, and I told him that I need money to buy supplies for my mother. He was happy to know that we reached a place where he could check on us.

A few days later I received sixty thousand SP. I do not know how it came. The Colonel called me and said to me, "Who is this person who sent you money?" I told him: "I do not know, maybe he is from my aunt side from Lebanon." He said to me, "it's forbidden to have more than twenty-five thousand SP, but since you are three, it will be accepted." After receiving the money, I bought clothes from girls who are allowed to have visits, during these visits their families give them clothes. The girls used to give me their old clothes since mine became shabby. They used to sell the clothes they get from their families to buy cigarettes with the money, I bought from them a pajama, trousers and a sweater until we are released, and bought supplies for my mother, and once I craved coffee, yogurt, and other things, and I also bought phone cards to check on my children.

In one of the calls, my husband told me he would visit me. I was very happy, but he told me later that he won't be able to come. I was very sad and, shocked since I never asked him, or the kids to come and visit me, because I was afraid that anything wrong could happen to him because of me and his parents blame me, and I also didn't want my children to see me in this case.

No one visited me until I was released on April 25, 2016. A lawyer came for me but couldn't do anything. Then a second lawyer came and made me sign on delegation, twelve days later I was released. Who assigned all the lawyers, and who gave them the money I do not know. I know that when my husband was contacted by court of terrorism he paid bail for me, my mother and sister worth fifteen thousand SP.

After our release, my mother and sister went to the al-Zahera, and I went to my sister in law house in Dummar project. I could not believe I was free. I did not know how to walk. My legs were shaking, and I was about to fall while walking. My joints were tired.

I rang the doorbell, and my children opened the door. My son was six years old when I left him. He stopped and did not come near me, he did not know me, I tried to get close to him but he forgot me. My daughter said hello to me. She was eight years old when I left. They got used to my absence. I didn't feel any love or passion. I used to cry alone, where my son couldn't did not approach me for a while.

### **Relationship with the street**

I stayed for four days in Damascus, and whenever I went out to the street, I would look right and left frightened that I would be arrested again. I loved Damascus, but after the arrest, I was dominated by fear, because I witnessed detainees returned to prison after they were released.

On one occasion, I wanted to visit my mother in al-Zahera. I took the minibus from the Dummar project, and we were stopped by a mobile checkpoint, where they took our ID cards. My kids' faces became yellow and mine too from fear. I felt that my tragedy would be renewed, my children looked at me in fear, and I couldn't be calm till they returned my ID card.

I was terrified on every time the door is knocked. I began to coordinate with groups to go to Idlib. Me, my mother, my sister, and my children, where my husband told me that he would join us later, but the road was difficult. We kept moving from one car to another and the trip took twelve hours. We passed through the military line, where the driver bribed the checkpoints.

When we arrived Idlib and despite the bombing, I felt free and I moved comfortably. We stayed there for six months. There was a truce. After a month my husband followed us to Idlib, I did not ask him to come, because I knew how he and his family thinks. So in order not to blame me one day because I brought him to a place under bombardment or to say that I took him to an unlivable place. And during our stay in Idlib he kept saying: "we want to get out of here."

### **Asylum:**

We traveled to smuggle ourselves into Turkey, we took a bumpy mountain route and walked for eight hours. Until we reached Antakya, but people warned us that this is a border area, and if we were caught without ID cards they might ask us to return back to Syria. I had a small amount of money since I sold two pieces of gold in Idlib to help us go to Turkey. When we reached Istanbul, my kids were unable to attend school because they had no kimlik/residency, which is a personal identification card given by the Turkish authorities to Syrian refugees.

My husband worked for 1,200 Turkish lira. His salary was barely enough for food. So I worked in a sewing workshop. I used to cry because I used to be school teacher and now I leave home at eight in the morning to work for twelve hours till ten at night and my children are alone in the house. However, I say thank god and this is better than prison.

I left my mother with my sister in Idlib. And my children stayed without school for three and a half months.

My husband did not like his work, because of long working hours. My brothers took my mother to a neurologist in Idlib. He told them: she needs intensive physical therapy, and he suggested to take her to Turkey where treatment centers are for free. Then my mother came with one of my younger brothers to Turkey, they took her into care house, but she needed someone to help her, so I told my husband that I would take the kids to Reyhanlı where my mother is and stay there until he sells the house furniture. He agreed and after our travel to Reyhanli, his family took advantage of my absence and convinced him to return to al-Zabadani, since the security situation improved, and he has a home, and a shop there, where he does not have to pay rent or work for twelve hours a day. He was convinced and asked me to do reconciliation and go back to Syria, I told him: "impossible, impossible, I know what detention means, and my brothers were forcibly displaced to Idlib" he made up his mind, and said: "I want to return." So I told him: "I don't want to return because I suffered from injustice." So he left us and returned to Zabadani, and after we got divorced legally, and the children stayed with me.

### **Relations with family and society:**

After my release the relationship between my husband and I was normal and devoid of feelings. Something inside my heart was broken, he didn't stand by or support me. When I was in Adra Prison, I knew that he wanted to marry another, and it saddened me a lot but I did not tell him that I knew. A year before my detention; I left two pieces of gold at my aunts' home, and instead of visiting me, my husband went to my aunt and asked for the gold. He and his family were the only family I had in Damascus that could visit me in prison, since my family was trapped in al-Zabadani. My aunt refused to give him the gold and told him that she will only give them to their owner, so he answered: "was if she is dead?" she answered: "when her daughter turns eighteen I will give them to her." I excused the besieged people, even though they did ask about me by phone. Even my friend from school did not leave me alone, she washed my clothes brought me food from her house, and wet wipes since I couldn't shower at al-Mojtahed hospital. I do not communicate with her now, to protect her, but for me, she is more valuable than an aunt or uncle, because she stood by me in hard times. As for my husband, something is broken between us, and I blamed him for not visiting me. He said, "My cousin and my mother, won't let me come." This answer shocked me, but I learned forgiveness.

I had a goal in life, but after detention I no longer had any. I am tired, fed up, and desperate. What happened was more than I could ever handle. I hated going out of the house, remained silent all the time. I felt dead, and was depressed. Since my arrival, I had sessions with a therapist, but I could not forget prison and its tragedies. Sometimes I feel indifferent and moody, for example, I was very committed to my children's education and teaching good manners, but now I'm more flexible, sometimes I feel that my life is over.

After my arrest, my male and female work colleagues blocked my phone number. Those who stayed in regime controlled areas were afraid for themselves, and I did not talk to them not to cause them any problems. Even my relationship with my family changed. I loved my aunts and uncles dearly. But now, any subject that concerns them is normal for me, as is they were strangers. They have chosen to stay away from me while I shared my feelings and did not distant myself. Even my divorce I find it normal, and it won't be harder than the injustice I suffered from into my detention.

The most important question came from my husband was: "Has anyone raped you?" I replied, "No" and none of the brothers asked me about this.

Currently, I live in Turkey, isolated in a strange area. As for my economic situation, my kids and I do not have a financial supporter. I cannot work as a teacher because of the language. I do not have a monthly income. I am always concerned about how to secure the essentials of life, and I cannot return to Syria. I am trying to find a job, and getting support from some people and from the Red Crescent, I feel that I have become a burden.

As a former detainee, I feel the suffering of male and female detainees. I do not see a difference between men or women detainees. Some of the female detainees were killed, tortured, and so did men. The only difference is that torture of men is more violent.

Socially: detained women are rejected and avoided by many, this is how I feel. But after all these years and the arrest of a lot of women, I believe that the community relatively is more accepting. Some people tell us: "You are the crown of our heads." Others do not accept us but do not express their opinions. Personally, most people I meet are sympathetic to the cause.

### **Last word:**

Those who committed these crimes must be trialed with maximum charges. We were unjustly arrested, and without guilt, and even if we consider that my brother was guilty, why should I pay the price?

As detainees, we have to stand together and support the trial against them. I did not support the regime and I was not against it, but they did me wrong, and I wish that I will have the opportunity to be a part in the prosecution of criminals.

Equity for female survivors should be by psychological rehabilitation, and by empowering them. I as a teacher, need to renew my information, since my memory is weakened after five years of unemployment.

I need courses in both computer and language, and all must be free. Besides finding a job for a survivor to live a decent life, since many survivors are widows or divorced. I am now hoping to get an asylum in any European country, where conditions of life are easier.

I wanted to document my experience because I could not forget it. It was unjust to me, my family, and to girls I lived with in the prison. I cannot forget their faces, their sufferings, and their stories. I remember once I was crying badly, a prisoner in Adra prison saw me, and asked me why am I crying? So I told her that I miss my children. She told me about her suffering. She wasn't able to raise her hand and comb her hair as a result to the long time she was hanged from her hands during torture. She also told me how she was raped. I still ask about many of them, since we suffered from the same pain.

## Old Wound that was reopened<sup>2\*</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> - Nourhan (alias), interview with the author via WhatsApp, on: February 27, 2019, duration: 3.5 hours.  
\*Cover By: Ammar Khattab





صنعتي لسانك

مطوية

مطوية

1987

1986

صنعتي لسانك

I am Nourhan from Deir ez-Zur province, from the city, in particular, I am fifty-eight years old, and I am the only girl among seven boys, from a financially comfortable family. During my school days, my thinking was limited to my studies only. I had an interest in literature, and I used to read poetry and novels. I lived life simply, kind heart, very calm, I believe people and I don't assume bad faith, beautiful and spoiled girl, from a well-known family in the city, I and my family traveled a lot to the Arabian countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Oman. I had no interaction with people and neighbors, and I was far from the problems of society. I had a television in my room, and I was watching cartoons and educational programs, and my brothers watching politics.

I entered the University of Aleppo in 1982 and studied economics. When I started university, I wanted to mix with people, and even though we had a house in Aleppo, I asked my brothers to live in the University dorms, because I wanted to see the community closely, but mixing with people should me things I was surprised about how people treated and many other things.

I finished my university studies after solid effort since I have been cut off from it for a long time. Even a colleague called me and said, "My sister, its only five subjects left for you to finish it." I graduated from university late, and the last course I took was in 1994, and its name was al-Bassel course, it's the security situation that hindered my studies. I was followed by the security forces. The surveillance used to enter during the exam and pull out my paper before I started answering the questions and ask me to leave.

### **The beginnings**

When I entered university, my brothers said to me, "You are going to university, and you have to control your shyness. Maybe your colleague is sitting next to you, you shouldn't be shy." One of my brothers studied in Egypt - Ain Shams University, and the other in Lebanon, and they understood me the university atmosphere and asked me to mix and also behave.

I didn't know anything about the parties. We knew Al Baath party and the Nasserites only because people were in love with Abdul Nasser. No one forced us to fill in the request for membership of Al Baath Party. They headed to the poor class, and they were called by the "working class" As for us, they see that we don't need a party, so they didn't target us.

During my stay in the university dorms, I mixed with the communists, the nationalists, and the communist labor association, and I met many people who called me the bourgeoisie. I was ashamed to ask them about the meaning of this term. My interests were literary, and I started to know the meaning of these words, freedom, liberal.... And I started attending the meetings of the Communist Action association as a friend.

A situation happened to me during the first year at the university, which made the attention at me, a young man who was from Al Baath party, came to me and said to me: Come and attend our meetings, and every time he sees me, he says to me, Come on, I got upset from him. I told him, "My brother, if I were convinced in your party, I would have come, and the word colleague don't say it to me, am not a colleague, and don't stop me again in the university" so he said to me, "This is dangerous talk, and you will be held accountable for it." And actually, it was my first investigation within

the university and in the party division. I entered a large room with a security agent inside it. He asked me about what I said to the young man, and I replied that I travel always and I don't have time to attend meetings. He said: "No worries, we will make a membership request for you, and attend the meetings in wherever is the place of your stay" so I answered him: "I am not a resident in the country, and I do not have a specific place." I drove myself through the investigation in one way or another, but this incident, how I answered the young man and asked him not to call me colleague, drew the attention to me and people from other opposition parties said to me, "You are bold"

All the other opposition parties other than Baath party were called anti-state parties, they were the same as the Muslim Brotherhood, and that after the events of Hama in 1982. For example, we read the literature of the National Party secretly because it was forbidden, I used to attend the meeting of the communist labor association as a friend and as an independent, and I didn't join them. I wanted to know about their goals. Of course, these meetings were secret because they were being followed, and I realized that. When I met my friends, I heard them saying, "that the security arrested someone..."

Once I met with one of them at the cafeteria of the engineering college. So one man came to me and said: "Do not go, she has flyers and wants you to distribute them. Maybe she will arrest you, and you are not affiliated with their party." I did not go to the appointment. I was aware. Because I saw the injustice on the people. There was a girl from Hama, just because she was from Hama she and her parents were killed in it. They investigated with her permanently. She used to come to the university with the torture marks on her, and her hair was cut, she had no place to go. She lived in the university dorm because it was for free. Until she disappeared and we didn't see her anymore, as I heard then of rape crime, done by the security with one of the university girls and the girl's parents sent her to Spain.

I started talking about politics and curse the security and order in our meetings, but I didn't know that there were young detective girls who were sent to study at the expense of the state, under the title of internal missions in return for writing reports. During that period, paratroopers under Rifaat al-Assad were in control, where security called for me and said to me, "Your tongue is long, hide it in your mouth." One time the head of the branch told me: "You came to study, what's your business in politics, you are our girls, and we don't want to hurt you."

I didn't have political activity, but I was only with opposition people. Once I read a book about Marxism. My older brother advised me, and said: "Don't read these kinds of books because they will wash your brain more, stay normal." So I stopped reading it because I trusted my brother. He picked out the books I could read, and he said to me, "every age has a kind of book." He asked me to take care of my studies. My family and were in harmony. They advised me not to insult the government and the state, and I was telling them that the state security called me, and they say: "calm down, take it easy so a day won't come, where we were looking for you in prisons."



My first call was in 1983 when I was studying with two students, one of them was from the internal mission, but she was claiming to be an opposition. We were talking in front of her very comfortably. I used to read to them what I wrote about the country and the treatment of the security services to the people. Then I felt that I was followed when I go to the university, I told my colleague about it, and I used to say in front of them: "it's a shame on security to follow me," but this student wrote dozens of reports against me.

At one time, we arranged our things to play sports at six in the morning. I and a female student from Hama, whom I mentioned earlier, came down. But the snitch apologized after she told the security and found their patrol waiting for us on the university door. They took me with the student from Hama, she was taken directly to detention, and me to the lieutenant. I stayed all night, and the lieutenant left me for an hour and two hours and comes back to ask me, He said to me, "There are four hundred reports about you. Tell us who you meet." Then he said, "We will move all these reports for a small favor to the country, which is to get close from Arab students who live in the region, and provide us with their news and their affiliations," I told him: "serving the country doesn't a request, when I see anything that's against my country will speak."

When I rejected his request, he called the agent and told him, "Take her to her friend." When I was sent down to her, I found her exhausted from beatings and torture. Because they found words, I wrote on paper, and she kept it. She was under the title "Looking for a country." And because she was from Hama, they used to call her regularly and starts beating her first to be a model to scare the women who were arrested. Then she and I were presented in front of the branch head, and we were released, but the girl who was from Hama then disappeared entirely, and I don't know if they killed her. She used to tell me what they did with Hama, and she seemed like she was telling other people, so they shut her up at the end.

I was called again by the military security in the second semester. During the exam, in late 1984, someone called me and Peugeot car parking next to the college door. He said to me, "the master wants you," I asked him, "Who is your master?" He answered me, I told him, and "I have an exam!" He said, "I will wait for you." Before I leave I told someone from my province, and he told me, "If you're not out in half an hour, we'll make our calls" I went to them by my feet, the investigated me, and I left.

### **First arrest**

There was a meeting of all the opposition parties in 1986. I was on the guest list as a guest, but I didn't attend since I was at my parents. When I returned to the university, I found that security wants me, and one of the agents told me they were looking for me form a month. I ride in a Mercedes car with two Russian guns inside it, and two agents, one called Abu Fares and the other Abu Mohammed. They took me to the military security and entered me to their boss. I said to them, "Why are you torturing yourselves and looking for me from a month ago? Why didn't you dragged me?" so he answered me: "if you had an official political affiliation, we would have dragged you, but we want you as a witness."

They entered me into a dark room that was close to the branch door. Without blindfolding my eyes. I didn't know what time it was, but I knew its midnight. The

person who called Aba Fares came to me, and he started to bargain me, to get me out early in the morning if I respond with him he wanted to rape me, so I held him from his neck "I wanted to strangle him." I was sportive at the time with good health, so he hit me on the wall and felt the fire coming out of my nose, and I fell to the floor, and he started stepping on my stomach and insulting me: "you, whore ..." I am ashamed to repeat what he said. These words became known to the people and said: "I will waste all your years' tiredness," means the years of my studies.

Then they dragged me and took me to my friends from the oppositions parties, as they said, and they were "squeezed" in a small room. Before I was transferred to the central prison. Then they started entering to us with an iron rod in their hands and hit us with it harmfully. Tied every two girls with the iron between them. As if they are hugging the iron rods, and when they hit one of them, the head of the second girl hits the metal automatically and starts bleeding. Many women lost their memory because of this torture. This scene doesn't go from my mind till now. First, because it is disgusting because the girls are "opening their legs." Second of all because it's a brutal torture way, and there was crucifixion on the wall. There were rings on the wall, and the ropes are attached to them, such as the crucifixion of Christ, and starts beating with whips and other tools, chosen by the jailor.

Our room was disgusting, and food came to us in a bowl called "Kasaa" (big bowl), we all ate together, the remains of smashed food, they entered the others to eat first, but we ate after everyone had eaten, a sign that we were less than everyone else, actually we couldn't eat After all this torture. The detention period in the branch and the central prison was approximately sixty days, twenty days from it in the central prison.

My psychological state still wrong, and from this torture and I became nervous. My parents always say, "Do not bother her." They took care more of me until now, I feel tense when I talk about the way we tortured. Our life is lost, and our sweet days are gone. Sometimes I regret, and say to myself: "I wish I didn't enter the university and didn't see what I saw," and sometimes I say: "it's good that I knew."

My family was powerful and vibrant, "they intimidate the big heads," where the head of the branch was traveling, and his deputy worked on his way. After leaving prison, I heard that my colleagues were released after me, but they were forced to sign a pledge to stop their political activity.

During this period, some of our colleagues were detained in Aleppo Central Prison and died under torture. Another one, called Firas, was from a well-known family in Aleppo. He died a month later from his release because of injecting him with substances that led to his death. We visited him after his release from the detention, where he could barely speak.

It was the military security who carried out these arrests. Most of those who died under torture belonged to communist parties. I didn't meet the "brotherhood" because I didn't like them, I tried to stay away from them, not because I was "open-minded," quite the opposite I memorized the Quran, But I used to hear that the Muslim Brotherhood was opportunistic and opportunistic, not working for the benefit of the country but for their personal benefit.

Even in the security branch, we didn't have any "brotherhoods." We had people who had nothing to do with politics. They even once brought a girl who wanted to travel to

her family in France. They arrested her from the airport runway and arrested her for possession of drugs, she stayed for a year and a half and her family doesn't know where she is. French President Francois Mitterrand interfered in the issue because the girl has disappeared and no longer exists on Syrian or French territory. Security took money for her case from her relatives, and I think the case is for personal matters, even the personal matters they used to involve in for money in return, and this is their way from a long time ago. The girl told me that they raped her in the branch. She was beautiful and young. She was only twenty years old. A year after her arrest, the jailer sympathized with her and told her family after she gave him a precious piece that she had, where the security had forgotten to search her when she entered. She gave it to him and asked him to inform her family of her location. She was from Damascene origins, and she came to visit her grandfather's house in Aleppo. She wanted to travel from Aleppo to France, but they kept her only for entertainment.

### **The first arrest effect:**

After my release from the detention, they dismissed me "deprivation" from the university for two years. They then transferred me into a disciplinary council in the university. My brother attended with the dean of the college, who asked me to pay attention to my studies. I went back to my home in Deir ez-Zur. I visited some of the detainees after they were released. My young colleagues visited me to relieve me. I started to take hours to teach. Sometimes I preferred staying at home. My mood became erratic. Sometimes I didn't answer the phone or the door knocking, I became nervous, and sometimes when I am annoyed, I hit my face.

After I was arrested, my period timing changed, so I had it twice a month. I didn't give attention to it and thought it was because of the psychological state. But after I showed myself to a doctor, it was found that beating the jailer on my abdomen caused damage to the ovaries. The head of the State Security Court, who knows my family, I told him about the damage that happened to me. He asked me to complain against the jailer who beat me, and I complained. They took him to the basement like any other detainee and took all privileges from him. He had a car and a house. Because one of his relatives in the branch, and came to my family and mediated him, but he stayed punished for a month until I dropped my charges, it is true that I hate them because they ruined my life, and burned my life, but I speak credibly.

When a decree for the extra semester was issued, my brother told me, "Go to university, and even if you have not graduated in twenty years, take one or two subjects just for fun, get out from this atmosphere." But I didn't agree, so one of my brothers took me to university for safety.

After the story of the girl who wrote the reports on me, I became afraid, and my trust in the community became less, and my relationship with the street changed, I didn't go out alone, and started going out with my niece who grew up. My brothers sent me in a car, and I rarely walk in the street. When I went to the university in Aleppo, I immediately went back to my parents' home and didn't stay in Aleppo. Nothing satisfied me anymore. I started to lose weight, and my appetite became less, and I started to smoke and drink coffee, and if I get hungry I drink coffee or a cigarette

### **Investigation in 1994**

I have been called by the political security in Deir ez-Zur after the death of Bassel al-Assad in 1994. I stayed for going to the investigation for two days, but I used to go back to my house. The investigator asked me what I said about the death of Bassel al-Assad. He said: You said: "you exaggerated with his death. He's dead, dead what's the difference if it's as the father or the son." I answered him that I cried on his death as if he is my brother. I have no problem with Bassel. Then he gave me a "note" and asked me about three lines in it written by me. I asked him to let me look at it, the note was handwritten, which are big words about al-Assad family and the Alawite community. I said to the investigator, "This is not my handwriting," and asked him to compare it with my handwriting after I wrote in front of him. It was a hateful report from one of the girls, and then released me where the officer with a colonel rank apologized to me and told me: "Who wrote the report we know our job with her."

What I said about the death of Basel was: "he died, like others, why to turn the world up down." But I denied in the branch. And who wrote the report against me exaggerated the things and added the note. "Of course those are hired, their task to write reports to get money, they have "no self-esteem." From a long time ago, you can buy the biggest intelligence officer, and he will do whatever you want.

### **Call in 2007**

At the beginning of 2000, after my mother died, I opened a sports club for fun and wasting time. I was called in 2007, and also a question and answer. The lieutenant spoke to me, politely, and released me. They wanted to make sure from something I said, I heard from people in the club about money flow to some people. I told them: "There are many ways and the latest is somebody's dealing with Mossad. I heard about two artists living in one of the Arab countries who were dealing with work offices affiliated with the Mossad." The investigator asked me, "Who are they?" I told him: "A story we heard, and people talking about it," so they entered me to the head of the branch who told me that the artists were acquitted, and added: "My daughter, calm down, the problems on you became bigger." in fact he spoke to me politely.

### **Revolution**

I used to watch the revolution of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, and on February 17, 2011, the television broadcast in al-Arabiya TV was interrupted. I saw a video where people were cheering "Syrian people will not be humiliated" in al-Hariqa market. Then the Interior minister came and calmed the people, then I started thinking if the revolution starts in Syria, and then we heard about the events of Daraa and Bouthaina Shaaban appeared, and said that the president increased the salaries, so the people cheered in Daraa demonstration, "Bouthaina Shaaban, the Syrian people are not hungry." Then Bouthaina Shaaban said that the president issued an order not to shoot the protesters, where the bullets were falling heavily on the people.

The atmosphere in the country "Deir ez-Zur" was very quiet, and I started talking to the people that we must raise with Daraa and stand in solidarity with them. Because we are all in one country, things developed in Baniyas and Homs. There were no demonstrations in Deir ez-Zur until a month later. And after the first martyr in Homs

and took him to Deir ez-Zur for funeral and the security started to strike the people. I was participating in the first demonstration. We began with a picket at the university, and then came down in the demonstration and sent a letter to the family of Assad and the family of Makhoul, and I said on the microphone what Muzaffar al-Nawab said: "A pigs barn is more purify then anyone of you."

The crowd wants big, it was an evening in the court, nothing happened after as if no one understood what I said, of course, I was surprised by the big amount of ignorance, despite the existence of universities and schools. When you speak the slang they understand, but when you speak in a standard language they don't understand, everyone study to work, In our time we read books to educate ourselves, and we know the methods of torture from the writings of Abdul Rahman Munif, we read the books between exams.

The crowd gathered in the squares, and the people became more and more arrogant. After the raids and the arrests of young men, I made a speech when I saw the people numbers increasing, I said to them: "I call you, and I push on your hands." I spoke to Bashar and Asma al-Assad, I started cheering in the demonstrations according to the incidents, when Bashar al-Assad gave a speech I used to replay to his speech when the Minister of Interior declares I used to respond to him and make his appeal.

The things developed, and young men were killed, so I started providing first aids, I was a member of the Red Crescent. Once, I asked the manager to give me the crescent emblem so that I could help the injured. He said to me: "don't let us have problems with the security, I don't give a syringe."

My brothers heard my cheering in the demonstrations, so they said to me: "are you relieved now," I said: "not yet," so they said: "so you will continue?" I answered: "Yes, I want to continue." They asked me to let them know when I want to participate in the demonstrations. To provide security to me were young men will stand around me in order not to be filmed. And truly through the demonstrations period, I was filmed only once. I was talking to the girls. And my face didn't appear. When they saw one of them filming, they hit him and took his mobile phone. Some were filming the demonstrations to give Photos to the security as evidence to convict the participants in the demonstrations. And I sew masks for young men to put during the demonstration. So the security forces won't recognize them and arrest them and break into their homes.

Then drugs became less in the country. I started to go to Damascus to bring medicines, but I didn't use my ID card but another one. All the expenses were from my own money. When I needed more money, I used to ask my brothers, and they sell some of the stores they owned to support the youth. We didn't associate with any supportive side at all, or in any coordination, and I gave medicines to patients in my neighborhood, which is within the neighborhood which means inside my small environment because all pharmacies were closed and their owners traveled.

In one of my visits to Damascus to bring medicines in 2012, I went out in a demonstration in Yarmouk Street. There were two young men, one of them a Palestinian and the other one is from Deir ez-Zur, we were attacked by the Shabiha, so we hid in one of the shops there and the shop owner closed the door, we went out

after they left. I went to visit one of my friends, a Palestinian and told him what happened during the demonstration. He said to me: "Sister, here directly to the chopper." I thought that security forces kidnapped people from the streets and killed them in remote places. So the crime will not be attached to them. And starts talking that these murders are disagreements happened between young men. Where the regime is the actual killer. But my friend added that inside the security branches there is a chopper they put the bodies inside it. Such as the meat chopping machine. Where they chop them and throw them into the sewer, and I heard about this later from the detainees.

### **The Ambush**

In August 2011, we knew that a military campaign was coming to Deir ez-Zur. The men took the women out of the country, fearing that they will be arrested and raped, and I went out with them to Damascus. During my visit to one of the women, who were from Deir ez-Zur and a former trainer in the club I own, she asked me: Why are you participating in the demonstrations? I answered her because of repression and arrests and didn't pay attention to her question. Then she called me and asked me if I wanted to go with her to Homs because she would like to visit her sister. I agreed to accompany her to go back on the same day evening. We arrived at Homs garage, and there was a car with a driver and another young man in a civilian uniform standing and waiting for us. I thought they are her relatives. But when I got into the car, I found that the driver was wearing a military uniform. I didn't say a word, as it is normal. Then they took me to a house, and I discovered later that we are in Tartus province, because the car was "shaded," there was one chair and a small table in the living room. They locked me in and went out. Then the young man, who was wearing civilian clothes returned, with a bag in his hand that contains food he put it on the table and said to me, "eat if you're hungry" and left.

I remained quiet and start thinking in a way out, where an old man, gray-haired came and said to me: "How are you, Nourhan?" He began to give me some detailed information about me. I realized then that he knew everything about me. He asked me if I was afraid. I replied, "What should I?" Then he asked me if I went out in the demonstrations, so I replied, "No, why to protest? Is the demonstrations my class!"

He repeated asking me: "who do you know from whom participating in the demonstrations?" I answered him that my relations are limited, so he asked me: who from young men are protesting? "I don't know women, so how should I know young men?" I asked him: "Should I know who I'm talking to?" He said: "I am brigadier general of the Military Security Branch in Tartus." Then he got a call and said, "These armed men are passing weapons through Baniyas by sea root. He asked me to advise people that there are terrorists who are taking money to ruin the security of the state and the country. And that the state understands the people demands... etc." He spoke to me in national terms and asked me to help them because there were young men who were taking the wrong side, and then ordered the Brigadier to take me to Damascus

That women ambushed me, and she planned for this after she asked me why I am protesting, and I thought she had a personal knowledge with the Brigadier. At first, I was surprised by the ambush, but after a while, I started to hear about ambushes from

this kind, and that women were working with people like a lieutenant or a colonel, and they handed them young men and women in this way.

From Damascus, I returned to my house in Deir ez-Zur after I asked my family not to reveal my return. It was difficult for me to reach my brothers' place. I was in my home in the Hawiqa area, and my brother's houses and shops were in the center of the city, in the square with Bassel al-Assad statues in it, Snipers were between the two places. Then one of my brothers called me and asked me why I came back. I told him there is no work for me in Damascus and my family needed me, and I didn't tell my brothers about the ambush that I was exposed to until we met in the liberated areas.

### **My neighborhood almost besieged**

I used to organize my neighborhood matters for non-spread diseases, after leaving the garbage in the streets where the insects became more. My area was almost besieged .the bridge near us has three checkpoints, and we had to cross through them, and the distance between us and the nearest place where we could get our food was two kilometers. There was a sniper above the governor's house opposite to my house. When it's the prayer call in the mosque near my house, the sniper used to shoot the mosque microphone and the light.

When I returned from Damascus, I had to walk through the checkpoints to get to my house. The cars were not allowed to pass through these checkpoints. The regime was around my area. I had bags full of children's candies and other things. The agent standing in front one of checkpoint asked me: "Where were you?" I said to him: "In Damascus in Shaalan. Then he asked me what's inside my bags and opened them, but I put the children's candy on top and several medicines at the bottom enough for us if needed at night" The doctor in our neighborhood was a coward. One time we knocked on his door when one of the boys' temperature was high, and he didn't open. Other accidents happened, but he said to us, "I don't give a syringe." I asked him to only diagnose the condition without giving medicine. I have medicines, children's medicines, cough syrup, tetanus, antipyretics, antibiotics, etc.... My house turned into a field hospital in 2012, and there was examine bed I moved from the sports center where it was used for massage sessions. I told a young man that I had medicines if necessary, there were many children in my neighborhood.

The armament started in 2012, young men from the suburbs were crossing from our region by the river and then pass through the Durra Bridge and gathered in the country. In June 2012, the young men appeared with their weapons. The regime was conducting raids and blocking the access from which young men were passing through. Which is the door of one of the old houses, but the young men opened another access for them.

We used to cross the bridge to see young men and ask them what they need and found them once lacking antibiotics and vitamins, and I used to provide them with medicine, milk, and meat. They had taken control of a large area of the country. I had to cross several areas to get to them. They were far from the Free Syrian Army gathering and the field hospitals. I remember that one of the young men asked me to bring meat, even if it was raw because he was bleeding and a nurse was visiting them. One time I went to

the field hospital where they don't have any medicines left. I also provided them with medicine and some food.

I used to pass in front of the Baath Party Branch where there were guards. I used to take old women with me. She had a way of talking to the guards, praising the president, and thanks to her, we used to pass without being searched.

In 2012, the security forces raided the homes of my brothers, and they lived in one building. And stepped on the head of one of them. And when my brothers returned to their home, they found their children crucified on the walls and Russians guns are directed to them and in place to shoot on them. My brother and his wife because of fear they had a shortage of platelet, one of my brothers took them to Damascus.

My brothers were forced to leave their homes because my older brother was called several times. He was accused of inciting and financing the demonstrations. Another one was called and interrogated for six hours. "We contacted with people to mediated him, because if he stays for one night in the branch, his gone." Then the air force called him twice. Also, we mediated, so his name is removed from the air.

I received news from one of my relatives after he contacted an agent from the State Security upon on his request; that the agent said to him: "You must take her out of the country because she is on the wanted list." And I traveled, and this agent wrote that I was arrested at the state security branch on this date and released, my name, my older brother's name and the names of my two nephews were removed. One of my brothers, who could not remove his name because the instructions were to kill him immediately. He remained in the liberated areas and couldn't leave. He helped the young men, but he was not a fighter for his old age.

My brother stayed in our house in Damascus, in Shaalan area for two months. We couldn't visit him anymore because the security at Deir ez-Zur when they were asking about him, we used to tell them: "He is in our house in Damascus." His address was known to them. And when I visited one of our neighbors, the owner of one of the shops near to our house in Shaalan warned me not to approach the house because security took it over.

At the beginning of 2013, they arrested a young man from our cousin's from Bab Tuma checkpoint, and I worked with him to help the army dissidents to pass to the safety zone and return to their families. One time, I coordinate with a young man, called Ali, stood at the checkpoint and gave me money and asked me to send it to his parents. He also asked me to bring him clothes and go back together to Deir ez-Zur, when I come again to Damascus the next time. He called me repeatedly and was afraid.

I used to help young men to defect, I passed with them at the checkpoints, and I told them: "This is my relative, my son or my nephew." These methods worked on to them. Once, one of the agents started asking young men where they were from. So I answered him: all from Hawiqa young men, this is my niece, and this is my nephew "he said to them:" say hello to your families, and to the people of eastern Ghouta, "thank god, we passed." I wonder how I was arrested later, but I think it was because of an agent called "Abu Yusuf," He wanted to arrest me from the beginning. When the boys entered the city on December 17, 2012, they were doubtful about a woman who was working with the regime because during the demonstrations she was pointing at young men and threatening them because of their demonstrations. After she left our



region to the areas of the regime, she appeared on Syrian television after covering her face. Then she cursed on Bashar al-Assad and said, "Bashar the Free Syrian Army are our kids," and cried and later we knew that the military security had arrested her.

After her appearance on television, Abu Yusuf at the checkpoint stopped all the women, accusing each of them that she's the one who appeared on television. When I wanted to cross the checkpoint, Abu Yusuf was holding an old woman, crying and saying: "I swear it's not me, I swear Sir I didn't talk." I said to him: "Your security style is not working, I knew it from Mustafa al-Tajer to Hasan Khallouf." Which means, we know your security methods, and we memorized it from people who are bigger than you. You're playing a game, means your following this security method, it's a foxy method, with a weak person, so she will admit, although she didn't what your accusing her with, so he answered me: "all of them under my boot, they sold the country" I answered: "we don't know who sold the country and who build it! Let's us pass and don't dream of shedding a tear and leaving the woman's hand," he asked the agents while looking at me and said: "Get me this one who's wearing black" I answered him: "Get you who, am not your business, you can do me nothing." He replied, "You said those words!" I said to him: "Yes, the woman who talked about the president?" He answered me, "Yes." I said to him, "I will give you an information, whenever a woman passed you accuse her, You, You... you don't know who talked, an old women you can scare her, but you won't scare me, you look at me, don't wait a tear from me, and don't wait a word master from me, and I have only one master, my god who created me." He said: "So for god's sake, leave from here." I answered him, "Come on leave the woman's hand." I looked at the woman and said to her: "enough crying," this incident was on December 22, 2012, through which I wanted to go back to my area, they used to prevent us claiming that there were armed men, and I stayed there for three days after the entry of the Free Syrian Army and then went out

Abu Yusuf is a liar and mean, and I think it was him who circulated my name because, before this incident, I was passing at the checkpoints. I crossed the border and traveled to Lebanon, where one of my brothers lived and returned to Syria, which means there was no security sign on my name.

The last trip I made was in second half of January in 2013. We stopped at a checkpoint called Al tale checkpoint in Deir ez-Zur. I had an anesthetic injection for one of the doctors that I covered with candies. I passed with it through many checkpoints, all of them searched me normally, except for this checkpoint, it took an hour and a half, and dismantled the Pullman bus, which I was traveling in piece by piece, and found the needles, I claimed its tattoos injections, I use them in the salon I own, they took down a passenger who was from Homs, and we stayed in the bus wait to pass, but an agent pointed at me with his hand to go down from the bus, and our IDs were with them, and then they took me in a car to the military security, and here my name and family name were revealed to them because I was carrying my original ID card.

### **Second arrest**

I entered the officer room who's in a captain rank, and he was short and wearing civilian clothes. He said to me, "You're still alive, you didn't die? Why didn't you marry and my sat home and made a family? Why you didn't stay in your home? You're still alive!" And I discovered that everything I did them knew about, and added that I have killed and liquidated. There was a lieutenant colonel and forty agents who

wanted to defect. I thought the story was closed because I was suspected. We agreed to me, and he remains silent about it. "Here we dug, and here we buried," but the lieutenant was killed during a clash, and they accused me in his death claiming that I was coming to the regime areas to get information and give it to the Free Syrian Army "My file was big."

The captain called an officer named Suleiman and asked him to take me. He asked him, "Where to Sir?" He answered him, "To hell."

I knew Suleiman and another young man from al-Nayrab from the checkpoints. They sympathized with me and treated me gently. Even when the Free Syrian Army entered our area and we went out, they said to me, "travel" they warned me, and I didn't take their words seriously. They knew that my name was on the wanted list. Most of women arrests in Deir ez-Zur done by the military security.

I was supposed to go down with them to a room where there were detainees, but I was taken into a strange room! The room was designed electricity shock where the body gets burned, and no had no name or archive, such as those who were martyred under torture.

The room floor was furnished with barbed wires, to the right there was a tile I can stand on, and to its left behind the door, there was a desk with a machine. After I left the room, a young man told me that this was an electrical device and explained to me how they tortured with it. It looked like the shocking chicken machine, the room has light lightning, with a high glass window, and I saw things through the light, where the machine had two buttons and an operating switch. I drew this machine once and tried to ask about it later.

They left me in this room. I was standing next to the machine once on the left and once on the right. There was a place where I can stand and squat. The room was like a warehouse, full of cables and other things I didn't know, it was a messy room.

On the third day, they threw me a small piece of dry bread and six olives. It was winter, the room was very cold, and my waist was hurting due to coldness. They called me into investigations on the fourth day. The investigator told me, "Come on, tell us, patriotic fighter, why did you put your hands with the terrorists' hand?" He asked me several questions and then said: "Anyway if you speak or not, we do not care. Where are your brothers?" I said to him: "In Lebanon," he said: "Isn't Abu Omar who helping the armed men there?" I replied: "No, he went to Lebanon immediately after his release."

They returned me to the room, I stayed there for three days, my pain increased, and I was screaming, but no one answered. They threw me a piece of boiled and burnt potatoes. Therefore the bathroom they used to take me out of the room every twenty-four hours, and I reached a point where I couldn't stand it, I used to knock on the door, where they let me out but not before twenty-four hours, except if the jailer a young man I know. He is from Al Nayrab he sympathized with me, he was a friend of Ali who wanted to defect and gave me money to send to his family and brought him clothes with me, and he even visited me once when he knew that I was in the hospital.

A whole week passed, and my pain was getting worse, and I couldn't stand it anymore. I was knocking on the door, and no one answered.

### The Escape from the military hospital

They told me that I was infected with a disease of the area, called the fire skewer, which is a disease that affects people as a result of sadness, and they give me painkillers and injections. I spent twenty days in the military hospital, during which I screamed with great pain as soon as the effect of the painkillers ends. The burning spread from the left side to my waist to my neck and the disease spread in my body. The doctor told them that my recovery will take at least six months. This captain once visited me where he thought that I am in a military hospital, under their eyes.

One day it was quite in the hospital, and Ali was there, he was from Damascus, he put his friend from Al Nayrab for a shift in the hospital. I knew them from their standing at the checkpoint, and I transferred to the money to fill their phones and always brought them what they asked for. They agreed to defect, where his friend will follow him after, thank god and Ali were able to run from the hospital. One of the nurses helped me after she got the price from Ali. She asked me to walk with her to the bathroom and she told me, hoping for more money: "When you reach your family, send me money" I knew there was a plan, and I linked her request with a sign made by Ali which I didn't understand what it was then, which means to prepare myself. We exit the hospital through a door leading to a court. We had to pass the main street which separating the area and a tunnel leading to the location where the free Syrian army located. But there was a sniper on the roof of the museum. Ali called one of the young men after I told him that I knew most of them and spoke with him and told him who I was: "I am the aunt, I am the sister of.., from al-Roshdeyah" and gave him our location and that was not far from them but we can't proceed because of the sniper and a tower where there are always three or four agents. Where they used to hear at night songs about al-Assad like (the lions stay lions, and the dogs stay dogs), and the youth of the Free Syrian Army constantly demand them to defect and tell them we are your brothers. I knew this area, and I used to come to it. Then the young men started shooting to keep them occupied. We managed to pass through the liberated area. This happened on March 01, 2013. And am still wanted till now.

I asked Ali why they put me in the room instead of being with the detainees in military security. He said to me: "You were released from death. This room is dedicated to liquidation. The body shakes and burns. Inside it you are absent, don't know if you entered a branch or not. They didn't want the detainees in the branch to see you." I still don't know why they took me into the room where I stayed for about twelve days as long it's specialized for liquidation, as Ali told me. They were throwing me food leftovers. They may have been busy with others or enjoying my torture because I was suffering during my stay in this room. But they were careful not to be seen by any detainees, so they won't talk about me when they leave or say that they met me or saw me, and the policy of liquidation varies from one case to another they may liquidate immediately after arrest or after a period, for example, they killed the young man I was coordinating with him They arrested him from Bab Tuma five months later.

As for Ali, his name was still on the wanted list, and he remained in the liberated areas and went to al-Bukamal and to the village of al-Muhassan where his defector's friends. He visited us several times. After that, I didn't hear anything from him. I stayed with my family and their children in the city, which was all liberated areas.

### Life under bombardment

The regime used to bombard us with the launcher. I don't know the terms that young men used. It was four and then eight. The shells killed many victims, martyrs, and the blood of the children was on the ground, and once one of the organizations came to distribute aids in one of the places, where the children ran towards the distribution place, and a bomb fell on them, and some of them were martyred I went out several times to help the injured. Even my brothers when a bomb fall nearby they used to run to help the injured until the ambulance arrived, but they got mad from me when I went out to help, and they used to say to me: "enough sister, you should rest" and everyone in the town called me the aunt.

I didn't live with my family, but I lived in front of them and close to them, and because I was living in the house alone, boys used to knock the door when they finish the station, and sometimes they come at four in the morning, I say to them: "you're welcome any time for sure" and prepare food for them, and who wanted to sleep he will come to sleep, they were children and not able to carry a weapon, but they had to carry it.

Peoples work in station distributed, some of them was watching, and the others carried the weapons, and it was their duty to fight the regime in order not to enter the liberated areas, they became fighters. There were sectors, and each group works in a sector because they took ninety percent of the city, except for al-Jorah area, which stayed with the regime.

### ISIS

I stayed in Deir ez-Zur when Isis entered in June or July of 2014, since we have no place left to go, and we can no longer visit each other and go out as before, we avoided going out because they spread in the villages and the city.

Isis entered because of betrayal. Before entering the area, the young men used to gout out to nearby villages that Isis entered to confront them. They could not reach the city, but there was a man named Abu Dujana al-Zer from a village called al-Rez, gave his allegiance to Isis and then spread to the villages, but then they did not enter our country. We did not want to enter them to the village, then spread in the villages, but we didn't enter our region yet. Then they became close to us at the political bridge, and the young men clashed with them at the bridge, so they retreat for a specific distance. Once one of the young men told me: "Hopefully, we will expel them today, and we will force them to retreat. Wait for news from us today at two o'clock in the morning because we triggered the bridge so they won't enter," I said to him: "My God be at your side."

I stayed up all night, I stayed till nine o'clock in the morning until the man came, so I said to him: "I did not hear the sound of bullets not even the sound of a shot!" He said to me: "Their flags filled the country. There was a betrayal. Some people secretly gave allegiance to them. And dismantled the explosive devices that we put under the bridge and let them pass if you know how many people entered, only eight people, stood the whole country on one leg, Come and see their flags filled the country."

We were betrayed by the people of the village, and some of the villages young men in the city had secretly given allegiance to them, and there was a connection between

them and claimed that they were with the Free Syrian Army, and raised the flags after entering, and since they entered, the Tunisian and other countries entered after them, and immediately broke into the houses of the Free Syrian Army and arrested them, Some of whom fled and some of them were under investigation by Isis and then released some of them, some forced them to leave the country, and finally took control.

Once, before Isis entry to the country, I went down to the neighborhood and entered the women's beauty salons. I was calling and say to women: "We civilians can confront Isis." But they said to me, "This is not our mission, this is the Free Syrian Army mission, and why you're worried? Hopefully, they won't enter."

### **Life with ISIS**

In the first few months of their entry, they didn't interfere in the affairs of the people and treated them normally, and then they have imposed headscarves and started to tighten. There was a bad person from them named Abu Shaddad who later took control over the city. He said he was from Saudi Arabia, but some people said that he's a lair and he is from al-Hasakah, but he changed his accident. If he saw a girl not wearing the full costume, which they called the Islamic costume he used to hit her by the whip, they called women "hareem," and spoke to the women saying "ya Hurmah," even one of the women hit him, She was sitting with her nephew in front of her door, and he passed and saw them and asked the young man, "who is she?" He answered: "my aunt" so he asked him to go with him. The woman asked him, "Go to where with you? I am his aunt!" He asked the young man a question: "how do you agree with your aunt sitting in front of the house door?" So she pulled him from his long hair and put him on the ground and began beating him until a patrol came and took the young man and flogged him in the same neighborhood, to revenge for the Isis man.

I attended many quarrels between them and our young men. At first, they didn't talk to women but asked to talk to their "guardian."

In fact, I didn't mix with them, and I wrote about them as occupiers invaders. And I started to sleep on the sofa in the living room and my eyes on the door at night. I imagine that they will arrest me since I wrote and talked about them a lot, I shared about them on Facebook and ask the people to share as well, and we started to fear the people who are working as informers to them, and my brother warned me and said: "My sister, be careful, most of the women become with them, be careful of the snitch, and we cannot do anything with them, means" their mind is difficult, "and they have no intermediary, and they fear no one" I once attended, a shot fight between Libyan and a young man who was smoking a cigarette, he wanted to take him to punishment but the young people gathered around him, even my brother said to him: "Pray to the Prophet and forgive him," but he didn't answer him, even though he was in the age of my brothers grandsons, they were very cruel.

The missiles were falling on us, and no one didn't shell us from the coalition, the Russian air forces, and the regime. The situation was unbelievable. Most of the people who were bombed were civilians, and some people had the experience in the types of missiles and the side which was bombing us, and we all wondered why Isis is not targeted! For example, there was a headquarters that belongs to them behind my house full of Isis fighters, but it was never targeted and never bombed. They had a gas

warehouse at a distance not far from us. They used to go there permanently to bring the gas but never bombed. They were hitting according to old coordinates and mostly civilian. Once they hit a building which fell on an entire family. The barrels that fell on us were conical and pulled everything in their path. The fall of it on a residential building causes when turning around itself the fall of several nearby buildings. When Isis fighters impose on us a curfew, we stay for several days without food, and we can do nothing but patience.

I also saw many times, where Isis fighters were cutting heads, once I saw several men who were crucifying them on the fence of an iron garden, claiming that one of them was a drug dealer. They executed seven or nine young men at once. "I cannot remember their exact number." After wearing orange clothes, including a visitor from al-Hasakah came to visit his relatives, they said that he was from the national army and executed him, and the national army formed by the regime of civilians in the area of al-Jorah, which was controlled by the regime, I saw young men crucified from far and couldn't approach.

Through Isis presence period, I didn't cover my face, and the car of the punishment, surprisingly standing next to me and then moved. No one spoke to me, and they didn't say to me, the word ya "Hurmah." God helped me in many things." But after I was afraid after the betrayal spread, to consider me as betrayal and say that I was with the Free Syrian Army, because they were calling the Free Army (Awakening), and they consider them renegade, and they arrested all those who support them.

Once, they arrested a woman and accused her of hiding weapons for the Free Syrian Army to fight them. They arrested a pharmacist on charges of being a secularist, and he incited young men to hit one of their headquarters, where some young men hit their headquarters with bombs and eventually forced the pharmacist to admit that he was secular. And they started looking for the activists, for them, there is no law there is Sharia. They took the houses of the lawyers and consider that it became their property, and when people started working with them I covered my face for fear of myself, not to say that I was with the Free Syrian Army, and when I was on the road in order not to be known, I covered my face and I was walking curved like elder ladies who are seventy or eighty years old, of course am young and I can walk straight thank God, once I was on my way back at night they pointed on me by flashlight, so one of them said: "didn't I tell you she's an old lady."

In fact, I am fifty-five years old, but my brother in law's eldest son is my age, because, as he told me, I can get a salary from the Turkish government and register my brothers children under my name as my children, to be a big family where we can get free treatment .

We have the Red Crescent card and everything that my nephew's husband planned to "was for nothing" we didn't benefit from it, but I closed the subject because my brother was detained and I took care of his children, they are like my children and I helped in raising them previously.

## Injury

I stayed for a year and two months after Isis entry to Deir ez-Zur in June 2014 and on a visit of one woman. She lived alone like me and preferred not to leave her house for fear of any situation as I did. We met from time to time, but I missed her when she stopped visiting me, so I found her still in her house didn't leave it, we sat in her house small garden with my nephews who came, the atmosphere was calm with no bombing sounds, where the house owner went to prepare us breakfast. When I heard the sound of the plane, I said to them: "Oh my god the plane came, now it will ruin our day," they answered, "no, no its far away," but they hit us, and on the house opposite to us, I was injured in my neck, and shrapnel entered my body, and I still have one shrapnel in my right lung, and They took me to the al-Mayadin area and brought me a private doctor. I underwent surgery. The doctor stitched the artery after I cut the carotid. I stayed for a month doing medical checkups, and then we waited for one of the smugglers who brought us to Turkey in November 2015.

The soft glass kept going out of my chest for two years, and I always felt something under the skin. When I scratch it very soft glass came out white instead of transparent. The doctor, the same doctor who made the operation to me who I visited when he came to Turkey, its color changed because it became under the skin. When the Syrian TV reported the bombing, they said: "A terrorist camp was bombed in the Hawiqa area." A week after the bombing which was carried out by the regime, the same area was shelled, and an entire family was killed. The grandfather and his daughter in law and about three people, where the rest of the family members were injured by shrapnel. Where the Syrian TV reported this incident as the following: "A weapons warehouse was destroyed," and they were hitting civilians! Most of the bombing was on civilians.

I couldn't do another operation in Turkey, because they feared the knot formed in the neck near the artery and its close to my injury wound, which is a toxic knot formed from a while as a pressure result, they even refused to scan it by ECHO, but my doctor has been scanned it and told me that it's a strange object and it's affecting my health, but I honestly found that my treatment follow up at a private doctor will be expensive, they asked me to conduct a full blood test, x-rays and I don't have the financial possibility, I was washing dishes in restaurants on a daily basis in order not to ask for help from anyone, and all of our property in Deir ez-Zur and the regime is resident there, we tried to sell some of them but we didn't succeed, And my brothers stayed in the liberated areas of Aleppo villages, and have no possibility to travel to Turkey. When the regime bombed us, and before it regained control of our area, their friends managed to collect money to leave Aleppo villages, they couldn't do more than that.

I wanted to go back to my family when I didn't find a way for my treatment in Turkey, and that was before my brothers' left Deir ez-Zur. I called them but they told me that the situation became very difficult and I couldn't handle them, where Isis went too far with the city people.

My brothers sold me an apartment worth two hundred thousand SP, which means cents, to get out and treat, where the most expensive shop or house sold for five hundred thousand SP, but people had to sell the war traders are taking advantage, when I run out of money I started working to live, but I used to shine up my image in front of the people. When people ask me about the nature of my work, I tell them that I

work as a translator in a company. Sometimes the society is ruthless and considers the worst and people are interested in appearances, and we passed through conditions alone. God knows about it.

### Changes and challenges

Several situations happened with me during my university studies. I used to cry, and my brothers used to say to me: "You either leave it or be strong" take your right by your hand, don't come and say that there is a student who talked to me, and I cried, no, tell us, the student talked and I respond to him and answered him, they encouraged me so much I even rebelled against the community, "she says, laughing."

My relationship with my brothers is good. They ask about me and call me constantly. They always apologize to me and say: "You know the situation, my sister we are sorry, we have nothing to help you with, and if we did we would have sent you."

My biggest challenge is the economic and social situation. I was surprised by the society and the people who know us, respect and appreciate us. They abandoned me. Sometimes I say to myself that I have to make my heart as harsh as people were harsh with me. At the level of treatment, I came to Turkey, and I was injured, and my brothers friends didn't stand with me, and I needed a killer urgently needed to enter the hospital to be treated, but they were telling me, we gave a hundred dollars while it is free, I want a house, I want shelter, and work is not available to me permanently. If I can't find work I can't I pay the house rent, one time I went to live in one of my relatives houses, but I couldn't stay with them, their family is big, and their guests are many, and they have a lot of children, and I want a place where I can relax, I am alone here, and no one helped me! Even at the level of organizations, I registered in a Turkish organization, but I didn't benefit, and I intended one of the organizations to learn the Turkish language to work and communicate with the Turks. The employee said to me: "It's forbidden, Language courses are only to the younger generation." I replied that learning has no specific age. She said, "These are the Turks instructions." Then she added: "Come on, you adults, you have lived your life, and the story is over, open the opportunity to the youth, we have no opportunities left" so I answered her: "you're talking to me impolitely, you youth generations have more opportunity than us, we older people no one accepts us at work and no one accepts us in anything, throw us in the trash then. Since we older people have no role anymore!" then I left.

Since I came to Turkey, I got shocked by this situation. For example, there was a sixty years old woman who was working in a restaurant far from her city and needed an hour to arrive. She went out to work from nine in the morning to nine thirty at night, she used to arrive to her house exhausted, and we used say that she will die whenever we saw her, I always wonder why there are no elderly people services. When I used to work, I saw exhaustion and hardship on my own, and I always asked, "Where is our place in society?" The aging thing affected my psyche greatly. I came to Turkey in a circumstance and a time when I was old. If the revolution took place while I was young, I would work and afford more and have the power for all the challenges, and my situation would have been different.

I also contacted another Syrian organization that was providing assistance. They gave me the number of two people, Muhammad and Suleiman, "surprisingly" like the names of the security agents, "Muhammad and Suleiman." I called Suleiman, and he



didn't answer me. I called Muhammad and said, "My son, I want blankets?" He replied, "We are now busy in Akshakla camp, and we are distributing aid." Then I communicated with him again, and he said to me, "We don't have now." I was embarrassed to call him again.

I called an employee who works in another organization that provided assistance. He told me that he left his job in the organization. I felt that. If I had acquaintances, they would help me. I knew someone who worked with my family as an interpreter, who worked in Turkey as an employee in one of the organizations, so he talked with the organization manager, and told him: "don't worry, no problems, let it her come to the organization." From the beginning of the meeting, he said to me: "First we want to help you with housing and stability before work," I told him: "this is great" and when I called him later, he said to me: "Housing is difficult now, but we will hire you in the organization and make for us coffee and tea."

Then this man left the organization and handed him over second organization management, where they stole people in it, took the people names, carried the lists, and went to Istanbul. He started taking aids under these names, he gave some of it to the girls in Urfa and then sold the rest of the aid. Like gangs acts. And they are Syrians, Yes, Syrians! The Syrians disappointed us greatly, I hope we won't reach the humiliation stage, but hey were unfair with us.

I also enrolled in an organization to attend a language and sewing course. I went to them on time. They said to me: "You should come after the tenth day of the month." I went on the eleventh day and found that the course started. Then I went to the language teacher, and he said to me "the number is completed" I went to the director in charge of the organization and asked her to sit in the classroom or during the break to learn and work in a sewing workshop. She refused and said to me "It's a security responsibility!" I said to her: " support me financially" she answered me: "we are psychological and social support organization" so I said to her: "All of you raised this slogan psychological and social support, we are not crazy and talking to ourselves, if you gave me every day a lecture I will not rest as long as I am not comfortable financially," and I left.

In fact, money brings comfort, and wars show people in real. Some older women made friends with Turkish men to spend money on them and without marriage.

### **Last word**

Therefore the procedures that should be taken against the war and crimes against the humanity I say: "There are international laws and there are supposed to be trials, and they should be arrested and tried, but even in a dream this won't happen. It is true that we are talking and working, perhaps, and maybe our voices will reach, but we don't have hope, and most of the detainees are mentally tired, even if we talked our laughed but our soul is tired due to the great wound."

At the beginning of the demonstrations, a woman who works with security told me: "what do you want to participate in demonstrations, you have everything?!" I said to her: "it's an old wound that was reopened," I have shortened my words, and I didn't t want to speak more to her and tell her that they killed our children and arrested them, there are people talking to them is a loss, and you should shorten your conversation, two words are enough, I knew she's from the security, and in fact it's an old wound

that was reopened, they abused us a lot. When they called for freedom, many members of society misunderstood it, because we know its meaning. We mean the freedom of opinion and expression, and that people live safely without informers and representatives of security. They hired most of the people with the intelligence to write reports for them. And sometimes these reports are malicious, and because of personal disagreement, this wound will never heal, it even opened more due to the way they treated people through the revelations as well. Its true am not young, but the genes in our family make the signs of aging not visible no matter how old we became. But I didn't imagine that aging will be apparent on me, the three years I spent in Turkey have increased my grief above the revolution grief. I want to rent a house and get out of the people's homes, "it's a shame." I eat shyly, and sleep shyly "it's not a life anymore."

Psychological or financial support don't justice the detainees, but in fact, even though am not a person who loves the money, but money plays a big role, and its lack humiliates, at least you can rent a place where you can live and feel a little stability. Means fixing what broke.

The criminals should be punished and everyone how to treat people badly, if there is justice, the criminals must be held accountable not only during the period of the revolution but also the old criminals. If international judicial tracks are opened, I will be a part in the prosecution against them.

Before we learn what politic is, we heard that the conscience detainees have their respect, and if anyone wants to write inside the detention, they will provide him/her with a notebook and a pen, and deal with him/her differently. But in Syria, "it's all hitting and humiliation." A volunteer agent in assistant rank said to me: "I will deprive you of the study year's tiredness" and hit me on my stomach during my first detention, why they deprived me of my studies!

I wanted to document my story because when I tell it, it is true that it raises my concerns, but if I say what is inside me, I will be relieved for a good period, "it's not ok to tell the society," few people know that I was detained.

I told my story under a fake name because the situation in Turkey differed, and I don't want anyone to read my story in my real name. Let them read the story of one of them, but who is this girl, the daughter of this man, I do not want this. People are looking at us t we the people of the revolution differently. I heard some people in the liberated areas now saying, "We were in the country, but it's not our business," "it's not my business anymore as well," in addition to the liquidation which happening to activates. I want to die. Naturally, I don't want to die at the hands of Shabih, and this is my right.

Even those who were with the revolution when they arrived in Turkey. They completely turned over the revolution, and there are mercenaries working in the name of the revolution, and they have nothing to do with it, our lives were under bombing and beating the most merciful than now, and the relations between people were cooperation and love relationship, we were checking and reassuring each other even when The bombardment is above us, but here there is mean and hate. "You the demonstration people, you ruined the country." OK, did we have air forces or rockets to bomb with it? And who doesn't know that I am from the people of the revolution say about us, "Those are the revolution people, we were living in safety," where is safety?!

Who didn't have an interest in politics don't know what happened, there are people life mean to them only to eat and drink, there is a French example we read in the third year in the language subject: "We are a nation which eats to live not live to eat." But our people apply the opposite, how can we discuss them, we are tired and have no power anymore.





## So I'm not kept in the Shadows<sup>3\*</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> - Hanadi, interview with the author via WhatsApp. Interview was completed in several stages; started on: February 23, 2019, and ended on: March 09, 2019, duration: 10 hours.

\*Cover By: Diala Brisly



Liala  
Brisly

I am Hanadi, I was born in Damascus in 1986, but in official records, I was born in 1985. I am originally from the Golan, but I adopted the character of the people of Syria, and I consider myself one of them. I did not complete my studies, I only reached the eighth grade, and during my exams in the eighth grade it was my brother's wedding, and my family did not care that I had an exam, and I failed because I did not go the day after the wedding to the exam. I still remember that day I had the most important subject in the exam, namely mathematics. After I failed, I did not go back to school because I was ashamed. I was supposed to re-do the eighth grade, I felt that it was too much for me, although I liked studying a lot, especially scientific subjects such as physics and science; I had no tendency towards literary subjects.

During that time, my late mother was diagnosed with cancer, and no one told me about her illness. I became her nurse. I spent two or three years of my life with her in hospital, I was very young and didn't understand much in life except that my mother was sick. I had no private life or friends. I saw in front of me, as a child, the death of a large number of children in the hospital, and my character changed and I became isolated, so my father and mother decided I should stay home instead of in the hospital with my mother, because they feared the decline of my psychological condition. Additionally, my mother became so much worse, and I could no longer take the responsibility on my own. But leaving her and staying at home, I felt a lot of emptiness in my life because I was used to being with her all day and night, washing her feet and sleeping near her, I felt a little safe near her. She used to become irritated and sharp with me when she had a fever, but she always told nobody could understand her as I do.

When she died, God rest her soul, there was a big gap in the whole family, not just for me, but for my brothers who were older than me and all married. I lived at home with my father and sister, but in my life was a terrible vacuum, so I decided to return to school. My father refused this on the pretext that I had dropped out of school about four years prior. I didn't listen to his opinion, as usual. I went without his knowledge and bought ninth grade books from the Hamidiyah market. I sometimes studied in the bathroom in dim light so that my father would not see me. I used every opportunity to study. I remember that he saw me on the last day when I was returning from the Arabic language exam and I told him. He did not object to it; the reason for his rejection at first was he thought I was not serious in pursuing my studies, and he said to me when I told him: "God help you succeed."

I did not expect to succeed, but I succeeded and took the literary baccalaureate, although it was difficult for me because there was no way to learn or get support from anyone, I succeeded but my grades were not high, but thankfully I studied a year at the Institute of Secretarial and Business Administration. But I did not like the Institute because I wanted to go to university to study psychology, so I took the Baccalaureate exams again and succeeded and my grades were good. I entered the branch I wanted through Parallel Learning, and submitted my papers to enroll in university, in the province of as-Suwayda. Then the [conflict] began in 2011.

At the time, I had not yet grasped the situation, but like many people I had the feeling that something was going to happen; people would say, "God save us from what is going to happen."

During the revolution we understood how the regime enslaved the people; what changed my views was an incident that happened with me when I was at the Institute. There was a [pro-state] demonstration and it was compulsory, and I still remember until now how they forced us to participate, they brought buses and stood in front of the door, called us by names and forced us to go up one after the other.

I did not want to participate, and if anyone did want to participate, Umayyad Square is close by and there is no need to drag people and force them to participate and disrupt the work hours and walk through the streets and erect security barriers.

During the march, people began to chant, the scene was disgusting, young men harassed the girls, and the Shabiha and security were everywhere. We did not know what was happening in Daraa, because the regime was showing us that it was under attack from abroad, and we - sons of the homeland - must be with him. I began to cheer for freedom, but people gathered around me and told me it was forbidden to utter this word, because the enemies had used it, and we had to chant "Anything for you, Assad" and another sentence I forgot including "eternally" and praising Assad; I was amazed at how they prevented me from using the word freedom!

### **The beginning of my activity in the revolution**

On Friday of the same week, I was going to my sister's house. There was a demonstration in al-Qadam area near the police station. I felt enthusiasm, a different atmosphere and spirit, and involuntarily along walked with them, they were all men, there was not a single woman among them, there were no police or security deployed, but the police were standing and watching. I was pleased and began to cheer with them, and I still remember well that the chanting was for Daraa and lifting the siege, and I began to ask about the matter. People told me that Daraa was besieged with tanks, and children did not have milk. I said to myself: "What? Can it be we have become like other countries!"

I recalled the first demonstration in the revolution, which took place in Bab al-Surijah, I think, where my friend and I were applying in a ministry for teaching hours after the Baccalaureate. We saw the protest and heard the chants, they were beautiful, but a group of people was saying to them "Traitors." I told myself we were living a great experience, and I had to which position to take on what was happening, and decided to be with the revolution. I followed the news and demonstrations, and began to communicate on Skype with young women and men and coordination units, and I began to form the basis of awareness of current affairs, and we started to prepare phone and Internet packages in our homes. Then, electricity began to get cut in our areas for long periods.

The big obstacle for me was my family, my brother and my father specifically. They told me I was a girl and should not go out with the men and chant with them. I broke the rules. I began gradually to communicate with people to go out in the protests and I was happy to do it. The young men asked me, because I was a girl and could move around easily in the area, to help with relief and medicine, my first job was delivering aid for the displaced from Daraa and Homs. Then we worked on transporting the wounded. Honestly, in the beginning there was no one carrying weapons.



I worked at the coordination unit under my real name, because I did not know that they would do what they did with women. I entered into the coordination unit of al-Qadam and the southern areas, and my name was registered in their lists. There were more than a hundred and fifty people in the unit, but the number of women did not exceed ten, and the names of most of them were aliases, but I put down my real name, and the job was wonderful.

### **The difficult decision that changed my life**

When the siege and shelling started in at-Tadamon and al-Kadam areas of Damascus, and the army entered the tanks and raids started, people fled at dawn and left everything; money, gold and fled as if it was the day of Judgement. This is when the real and difficult work began. It was June 2012, I was at my sister's when my family decided to leave to al-Qunaitra. They called me and asked me to come because they had brought a car to leave, so I delayed and told them I would come later. My father called again and asked me to come, but in the end I told him I had changed and I could not live with them, it was impossible.

I had to make the difficult decision, between fleeing or remaining in the area, although staying and working was like suicide. But I decided to stay, and I told myself death would come eventually. This important decision changed my life. My father was very upset with me, he tried to change my mind, in the beginning with anger then attempting to placate me. He would tell me "Enough, come, they will kill you tomorrow." I will never forget what he told me one time: "They're going to kill you, slaughter you, they are racists and [religious] fanatics." My father knew the regime very well because he was a retired soldier in the army. The scene changed completely after the regime carried out its raids and the tanks entered the city, and defections from the army began. It was the first time I had lived alone in the house. It was very difficult for me and for my family, because I am from an extremely conservative community which cares more for reputation than it does for people. If I had been a man it would have been okay and there would be no fear for me, but being a girl, they were afraid of what people would say, they were not afraid for my life.

I rebelled against this reality and left them. They lived in one place and I lived in another. I didn't want to be a zero in the margin. This decision I made was the reason my family abandoned me when I was arrested and wouldn't help me, because I had abandoned them first.

The responsibility became greater, and I began to learn by participating in first aid, nursing, and medical courses. Then we took the wounded from one place to another. We sometimes transported martyrs, and God knows that I did not hesitate in anything I could do. We saw people shot or slaughtered and thrown onto the roads. I saw this with my own eyes as I was going in a car to help the wounded. While I was moving from one area to another, I had to pass through an area where there was a sniper, and God saved me from being shot.

I was with another girl in the area, who was studying law. She was strong and brave. She told her parents she was living with me and we promised to stay together. I had met her during a protest and she helped me with photography and other matters.

During this period, several young women were encouraged to enter the area when they heard that I and my friend were in the area, staying for a period of time and then leaving, but my friend and I stayed in the area continuously until I was arrested, and we worked together voluntarily and we were not affiliated with any organization.

Everyone had seen me go out in the demonstrations, and some people were talking about me, and they said to my brother, "You should control your sister." It hurt me a lot. I cried and asked what it was I was doing that was so wrong, and why people were gossiping about me! I wasn't doing anything personal or taboo, all I was doing was joining in the demonstrations. This incident occurred when my nephew had some trouble in the market, and someone said: "Your uncles are pretending to be men! Let them control their sister first." People refused that women take part in the demonstrations, and this was the most difficult thing in my life, I had no support and no one encouraged me, and I was always subject to criticism and criticism because I am doing what I want and not what they want.

When my friend's family knew that she wanted to live with me, they brought a car to take her away with them. So she ran away in fear of them because she didn't want to face them. I stayed behind, and because I did not confront them I went out into the street and they tried to run me over with their car. Her sister attacked me and said "God punish you" and started to curse me, I didn't reply for fear that people would gather around us, and I pretended that I could not hear the insults, but they continued to chase me in the car.

They threatened me and accused me of inciting their daughter against them, and they held me responsible for her staying in the area. They said "You ruined her, you changed her mind." All because she decided like me to live alone and not with her family. As usual, parents look for a reason so as not to blame their daughter and say that she made her own decision, so they say that so-and-so corrupted her and was responsible. It was people gossiping that scared them, it was not important if the girl died, but more important not to have people talking about us.

After the siege, my presence was necessary because there was no woman left, they needed a nurse, and because a woman moved easier, I could bring medicines, I could go into any house, talk to its inhabitants to open a field hospital in it, and I could accompany the wounded and cover up the situation at checkpoints. For example, I was sitting with an injured person in a car who claimed to be my brother or my relative so that no one would notice him. They needed a woman to do these things, and I was doing this in coordination with the field hospital that was formed whose team was from Daraa. Every faction that came from Darayya, Ghouta and other areas and provinces had a nurse or a doctor, but they decided to have one field hospital and I was part of its medical staff, which included a surgeon, a nurse, a dentist and others.

As the siege intensified, doctors and people working in the hospital began to withdraw, and I stayed with a [male] nurse who had about forty years of experience in nursing and some other people. The hospital was treating civilians injured by sniper or shrapnel, and I was helping the elderly to take them away from the shelling. As I said earlier, a week after the field hospital was equipped and organized, some women learned that I and my friend were in the area and started to come to offer help, some of them were Palestinians from the Palestine camp. The hospital became ideal, with chairs for patients, and we started sorting every doctor or nurse with one of the girls

and we spread out in all the areas as medical points. I stayed in my area near my house. Unfortunately after that, the regime started shelling the medical points after knowing their places, and things became much worse; there was no food, there were no medicines, and the possibility of our exit to the areas of the regime were low, and the problems and mutual kidnapping started. Most of the battalions were civilians who had entered the military field together with a few defectors. With every battalion there was a media office, a medical team and a sheikh who played the role of mufti. I do not know who was behind this decision. Until my arrest in October 2012 I did not see any radicals in the area like those we hear about now; some young men used to smoke and drink, but even those we thought they were hard-liners used to sometimes blaspheme.

The shelling began to intensify and the FSA began to lose and many were killed in the shelling. Every time one person was arrested, ten people followed [were arrested]. They surrounded us in al-Assali and al-Madinya and Sbeneh.

### **The first arrest – I fell into their hands**

On October 5, 2012, before the siege, I was in my sister-in-law's house in al-Mouhajrin, sleeping, bathing and resting. In the morning I received news that my family's house where I lived was bombed. I thank God that I was not there at the time of the bombing. I took the camera and went to photograph. I heard that the regime had entered the area and the FSA had withdrawn to Ghouta. It was the regime's habit to search any area it enters and call it "purifying," then withdraw. When I went into the area, I was not aware of a clash between them, but there were pockets of FSA, a battalion or two battalions, and I thought that the area is safe and there is no clash and I can enter, I started filming and photographed some tanks and helicopters, and made sure not to let them see me as usual. But in my heart I was uneasy. I went to the house of one of my friends, and I left my bag, ID card and my belongings there, I do not know why I did so, as there was no need and her home was far.

I told her, "I will go to my family's house to photograph it and come back, and if I don't come back, I am either dead or the regime took me." I do not know why I told her this. I went and on the way I went down one lane and up another, our neighborhoods are intertwined. I heard someone shout to me: "Stop where you are" I was flustered because I had the camera, I hid it in my chest and put my veil over it so he could not see it, and approached him, and he asked me: "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm coming to take things from my house." He told me "You lie." I realized the area I was in was a military area where the regime was and it was a front line with the FSA. But I hadn't know that. I said "Is it possible that I would come a place where there is bombing and shelling?" But he did not believe me and said I was here to survey the location. I replied: "Is it possible that a person would risk death to explore a site!" But he said he was going to search me, and suddenly about fifty or sixty soldiers came out, and on their clothes was written "Raiding Branch." They were deployed in buildings, apartments and rooftops, and it was clear that it was a real battle, and that they were resting to resume fighting. I knew he had another purpose and wanted take advantage of the situation, not because I was in the area or that he doubted me, and despite my fear of him I tried not to show him. He took me to a house and walked a couple of steps ahead. I threw the camera away. Then he took me to another house with a room and a staircase up to the roof, the house had one floor. The soldier began to harass me

and say, "Take off your clothes, I want to search you." I said to him: "You can't search me, and I don't have anything with me, and who are you to search me!" He insisted that I take off my clothes. I was terrified, and I did not think of arrest and torture at the time, I just wanted those moments to end. He began to touch my body, and he insisted that I take off my clothes, and I told him, "I have a special situation, and I cannot take off my clothes" and I said "Consider me a sister, consider me a relative, you seem like a good man." He pulled my hair and screamed in my face and became very brutal, I threatened to scream, but he threatened me in return that if I raised my voice and if I did not let him search me he will tell all the soldiers to search me. He told me to take off my clothes or he would take me out in front of all the soldiers naked. I continued to beg and tried hard to prevent him, but he insisted and forced me to take off my clothes, and he searched me forcibly and harassed me, he did not dare to rape me, because soldiers were scattered in the building. I was helpless, very difficult moments I went through, and if I knew what would happen to me I would never have gone to the area. This soldier introduced himself, and said that his name was Sayed and that he was from Idlib, al-Fuah.

At first I had a strength that I didn't know I had, and I don't know where the bravery came from to tell him: "Who are you, how can you search me? I won't let you search me, and what did I do to search me?" But later in prison my strength broke and we became submissive. I do not know now when I remember how I never screamed when I was in solitary confinement. We did not dare to knock on the door of the cell to go out to the bathroom. We became sheep, like dumb animals, like slaughtered animals. Our strength was extinguished and our will was broken.

Inside the house where this soldier searched me, I found on the ground an old and small book thrown on the floor, it had some chapters from the Quran, so I picked it up off the ground and began to pray, and I thought to myself: "I think these moments are the last day of my life."

The houses were completely destroyed and burned, and then the soldier took me to the officer in charge of the military, he was old and huge, and all the soldiers were calling him sir, and on their clothes was written on the shoulders "counter-terrorism." They wearing black uniforms and some of them were wearing army clothes, and when he asked me I told him that I came to take things from my family's house and that my ID and bag were at home. He took my name for inspection, and then asked me about my house, so I told him, and he said to me "Go home." As I left, another officer caught hold of me. Another asked me "Where are you going?" They were toying with my nerves. I told him that I was going to my family, and he said to me: "No, you will not go to your family, I saw you before passing through the checkpoints, and your area is where the army of shit is, the army of dogs, and their carcasses are there." I said to him "What sin have I committed!" But he said "If you hadn't known any of them, you wouldn't have come here today." I tried to justify to him that I was studying and needed to bring my clothes from my house, and that we were moving from one place to another, but there was no point to all my excuses, because he was convinced that I had a story I needed to tell. I tried to keep myself calm in front of them but I was aware that I had fallen into their hands. Then, something happened that seemed like a miracle; suddenly a shell was fired from a tank and they were shocked. Because of the noise from the shell I couldn't hear for the next four days, because it was close to us. Some of them fled, others fell on the ground, a soldier was wounded and the shelling

and clashes began and the situation became insane. I found a wall to stand behind to protect myself from the bullets, and they told me to stay in my place. I heard that the soldier in the tank had defected and started firing at them and they killed him. The battle was very fierce. I saw everything. I had no chance to run away because they were everywhere. The shelling was hard and they were screaming and swearing, and the weather was hot and they were so dirty. One of them told me to walk down a street, I was surprised and started to walk away quietly and cautiously. He said to me: "Run, run don't walk." I ran, and here one of the soldiers and jumped at me and grabbed my hand and shouted: "Do not go, they will kill you." He was suddenly attacked by five soldiers who began to beat him and say to him: "Druze dog, son of a whore, why did you tell her?" I didn't know this young man, he was dark and thin, his hair was black and he wore an army uniform. I can still see this moment happening now, and God knows that they beat him so badly they probably maimed him. When they took me down the same road they told me to take, I found that it was a road full of tanks, machine guns and snipers, which means they wanted to kill me and entertain themselves. A young man saved me when he warned me. They bound my hands with wire and dragged me, calling me names like "whore." That word is their usual. "You're working with the shit army [FSA], you're helping them and you will confess who you are working with and who is giving them weapons." I froze. They began to walk me deep into the neighborhood, I was waiting for the right moment to escape, I saw the houses where they were centered, and I swear to God that I will never forget this day, the view became more terrifying. All the houses were wide open and I saw about nine bodies of civilians executed. Their hands were tied to with the white wire they usually use. It was clear from their blood that they were recently killed and the flies were hovering around the bodies. They were civilians and not soldiers, taken from the checkpoints and brought to this place to be killed, because the dead young men were dressed in tidy clothes. I don't think they arrested them in their homes but from checkpoints, because they were arresting people according to their IDs. At that time there were people returning to their homes to take their belongings, money or medicine, and many of them disappeared after their return. Before October 2012, The FSA had come and gone in the area and it was not besieged. Those who were not wanted or suspected passed normally through checkpoints and sometimes women were not stopped. But they arrested people based on their surname. Later, after I was released from my first detention in Branch 227 and entered the same area with two other people, which the FSA took place in November 2012, I searched for my camera and found it in the place where I had thrown it and took it. Then my family and I searched the houses where the bodies had been thrown. We did not find them, but we found the traces of their dried blood.

To return to what happened when I was captured, when I saw the bodies I started crying hysterically, it was the first time I saw bodies. It was terrifying. There were soldiers everywhere, there was intermittent fighting, and I was begging them not to kill me. One of the soldiers screamed "blindfold her" and they did. They took me to a room and put me there. He asked me to kneel, the situation was even more horrifying for me because I no longer see anything. I smelled very ugly smells, like rotten garbage or a dead animal. I was crying hysterically and I asked them not to kill me, and one of them told me "If you don't talk we will kill you now." I told him that I had nothing to do with anything, but they insisted that I have a relationship with the Free Army. And then another huge soldier came, I knew that he was huge from his shoes and I saw him

later. He started beating me on my face with his hand, then he put his boot in my mouth and then put it over the blindfold on my eyes, and he continued to beat me with his shoes. It was not a brutal beating but he wanted to scare me. I was heartbroken that he put his boot in my mouth. I will never forget those moments. Whatever I had done, who was he to put his boot in my mouth?

Then there was silence, and I heard him talking on the telephone with a person from one of the security branches and telling him that there is a girl and her name is so-and-so, and asked him to check my name. He was told: "Kill anyone you encounter" and replied: "But she is a girl!" and was told: "I'm telling you to kill anyone you encounter." When I heard that I asked him not to kill me and leave me in this stinking place, but he replied: "I will let you rot here."

At this moment they were discussing who would kill me, and they called on Ali and Hussein, and they always used the name Ali and Hussein, which are not their real names at all. I found this out later in the branch, they do not use their real names because they fear for their lives if their names are leaked. They called each other by names or titles. I heard everything going on between them and left my fate to God, the last moments of my life. Then one of the soldiers came and said to the one who beat me: "Sir let's not kill her, let us take her to the branch, she has information." They went outside to agree on what they would do to me, and a soldier approached me, God is everywhere bringing hope. He was carrying a white scented napkin and he lifted up the blindfold and told me in a whisper: "Do not fear, they will not kill you, but do not talk about anything. Keep silent, if you speak you will die, continue your denial" and he wiped the blood and scratches from my face and eyes. I did not open my eyes when he lifted the blindfold and I feared that he was toying with me, but I will not forget the smell of the tissue, it was a men's perfume. Then he began to scream at me and say, "You will confess, you will tell us with who you are dealing with." I knew that I would live, even if they took me to the branch, and I would not die this death. I felt that I stayed on my knees for a very long time, and I no longer know it was day or evening, I could no longer tell the time.

They decided that they would take me to the branch. They lifted my blindfold and we walked down a long road. It was late afternoon. The road was the highway to Daraa and it was empty of civilian cars, there were tanks and military vehicles only. They were marching and they were all from the army. There was a soldier holding me on my right and another on the left. They harassed me and verbally abused me, sometimes one of them stepped on my foot so I would fall to the ground, and pinch me so I would feel pain and scream, they made sexual gestures and one of them put my hand on his penis, all of them harassed me, with words or their hands or with disrespect. I remember one of them told me "There are two-hundred men here who I will let rape you, I haven't smelled a woman for two years. I'm going to get everything out of you, you will confess." It was not just a threat, they were able to do anything without accountability.

They took me to a black armored vehicle and put me on a seat with another seat opposite me. They blindfolded me and my hands remained tied. Five or six soldiers entered and closed the armored vehicle. They started talking to each other, regular conversations. None of them touched me, although some of them sat next to me. Then the officer who was torturing me and put his shoes in my mouth came and took down

a number of soldiers from the vehicle and four or five stayed and sat beside me, and I understood from his tone and their conversations that he was from Daraa and that his name is Abu Ammar. He was huge and fat and fair and his hair was balding, and he began harassing me openly without any shame, and he began pulling down my pants and lifting the blindfold and untying my hands. It was very dark, as if we were in a dark cellar, and he asked me to look at his penis and hold it and play with it, death would have been easier for me, I was very scared and became dizzy, I cried and he said: "If any sound or word comes out of you, I will kill you," and he began to tell me what he wants me to do with his penis: "do this, do that" and he was doing everything he wanted with his hand, touching and sexual movements, and he pulled down his pants, and I felt a second hand on my body, and a third and fourth, and my dizziness increased and I no longer felt anything and lost consciousness. It seems that I fell on the ground, I returned to consciousness to find him hitting my face and saying "wake up, wake up." He was very afraid, he lifted up my pants, and I collected myself, and he said to me, "If you say anything to anyone I will slaughter you." Suddenly the door opened and someone came to me and said, "I have the phone number of an armed fighter. I'm going to call him and tell him we are raping you now. If he loses his temper, that is proof that you are involved with them and we will imprison you and kill you. If he does not say anything, we will let you go and I will invite you for a drink in Mount Qasioun." I was silent, my tongue was tied with fear, he sat down and started to call, several numbers, several times, but no one answered, and sometimes the phones were closed. This officer was a colonel and his name (Ali. H) His hair is black and he's brown with a medium-length beard and a mole on his face, his eyes wide and he is stocky.

I am sure that if I were not in an armored vehicle, they would have raped me and did more than they did, but being in a vehicle did not allow them to do so. I think they were on patrol. The Ali person was not completely at ease, he was afraid of something, because he threatened me not to make any sound and I was crying loudly so that my voice could be heard, until I lost consciousness.

Then a number of soldiers flocked to the armored vehicle, and Abu Ammar left, and I never saw him again. Another officer came who was responsible for al-Qadam area, my cousin knows him, and when he saw the scene with the soldiers sitting next to me and my pants and blouse torn, and me crying hysterically, he knew that something had happened to me, he started beating them and shouting at them: "You dogs, animals, all of you, you donkeys, what did you do?" I did not stop crying for a moment, perhaps crying is what kept me alive, and the soldiers began to justify. When he opened the door, he noticed that my hands were not tied, and there was a weapon inside the armor. He started yelling "How did you leave her hands untied while there is a weapon?" Even though I hadn't noticed the weapon in the dark, the only light had been the light of the phone, and I had a breakdown. I think someone had told the Colonel what had happened to me in the vehicle because his expression had been dark when he arrived.

They tied my hands and put the blindfold on my eyes, and the vehicle began to move. I started to ask them "Where are you taking me?" One of the soldiers said to me: "Do not be afraid we will not go out of Damascus." We reached a building and they opened the door and lifted the blindfold, and I repeated the question: "For God's sake, where are you taking me to?" One of them replied: "Do not be afraid, do not be afraid,

this is the branch, they will interrogate you, and if you have done nothing you will leave." I did not understand then what the branch means, but I saw with my own eyes what it means!

### Section 227 - Cursed Ground

We entered Branch 227; the sounds of torture and terrible smells, in my entire life I have not smelled such smells, the torment of people, it was a cursed area ... cursed ground, smells of death, maybe dirt, illness ... I don't know, stinks. They took my information, told me that I could not carry any items, they untied my hands, and one of them searched me, and they brought me to a room, its area was small, and there are sixteen or seventeen girls. I was petrified when I saw their faces, dead faces, their lips were white and their eyes wilted, and they helped each other pick out lice. When I saw this, I started to cry again, and asked them about torture and will they kill us? The girls noticed I was hysterical, so they sat me down, and I told them, "I feel cold." They gave a blanket, it smelled, it was a military blanket that felt like thorns. The girls asked me about my name, where I was from, what was happening outside, how I was arrested. I could not speak, and nodded to them that I cannot speak, one of them said: "Let her be, it seems that they tortured her a lot."

There was a light coming from a yellow bulb, and I saw the red marks and blood on my hands because they were tied firmly, and my fingers were black. This blackness only faded four days later, and my clothes were torn. I learnt later when I was in Adra prison that the girls said I had been raped. But I told them: "I will not allow anyone to talk about me, and if this happened it is a matter that concerns me alone," and I did not talk about what happened with me except to those close to me.

In the morning the girls told me that I was screaming, crying and groaning all night in my sleep. After they gave me water and I woke up, I asked them for sweet food, and they laughed and told me that the food was just a loaf of bread and a potato, I still remember what I asked for and laugh at myself. Even the water was very dirty, and the toilet was inside the collective, and we used to see the girls using it, because there is no wall, and out of modesty the girls held up a blanket for each other, when one of us used the toilet, but the smells spread in the room.

The girls were of different ages. There were young girls and old women, but the girls were the most, most of them from Damascus, one from Daraa, and another from the village of al-Safsafah in Hama called (Salma. B), and she was a police-woman. She loved a young opponent of the regime, Ali, who asked her to bring him ammunition. When someone told the officer in charge, they brought her in for interrogation and she confessed directly, they brought Ali and killed him in front of her.

Branch 227 is one of the worst security branches in all of Syria. It is worse than the Palestine Branch and Branch 215. Toilets and sewage always have problems. It is a very old building and they do not do any repairs there. I did not eat there because I was revolted by the bad food they were providing. It is a branch located at the beginning of al-Tawjih Street where the Ministry of Electricity is located, behind the Military Police building.



The girls were telling their stories, and they started asking me about my story. I first gave them another name. I told them "Hanadi but my real name is Mahitab." I told them I was Palestinian. Frankly, I didn't give them any correct information about myself, I was afraid of them. After all, I no longer felt safe with anyone, anyone was terrifying to me, and I later made fun of myself for giving them false information. I wasn't really myself then. After a few days, I started to know them and we began talking and laughing. They told me, "Everyone's entrance is different, but you entered as if you were dead and now you're coming back to life." The next day, a soldier woke me up and told me to go out to the corridor, because I was like a dead person in my sleep, and in the corridor he put something in my hand, and I did not read what was written on it because I was sleeping. I later knew that it was a so-called "bill," like a criminal record. This is what harmed me and I became someone who was at risk every moment of her life.

I stayed asleep in the day and woke up at night. The ugliest two hours in the branch were late evening, the hour of interrogation, torture and beatings. In the morning they would transfer some to another branch or to court, and take out the corpses of those who had died in the night.

Everyone is able to adapt to their surroundings and environment even if they are in hell, the girls who had been four or five months before me in the branch told me a lot of stories, they had adapted to the situation and could tell the time accurately. I did not see the bodies but they saw them from a hole in the door, they transported the bodies of the tortured and put them at night in the bathroom, and then load them in the morning. Some of the detainees either died under torture, or died from strokes of intense torture and fear, or died from oppression, and this is also a crime.

During my first arrest I did not see anything, and I was not able to stand and look through the hole because I was absentminded and afraid, but I could hear the sounds of torture and the sound of electricity crackling on the bodies, pouring hot and cold water on the detainees, and the voice of the interrogator and his provocative questions, blasphemy and filthy language, and the prisoners begging for mercy. I saw one of the interrogation sessions when the jailer took me to the bathroom, sometimes the jailer needed to go for shifts or something else, so he had to take us to the bathroom and take us back to the cell, and he told us to look at the wall, but we were looking to see what was happening. I saw with my own eyes two rows of young men, completely naked, no underwear even, standing in the corridor, and those being questioned are blindfolded with a thick piece of leather, his hands back and his head and eyes on the ground, he trembles like a slaughtered bird, and the interrogator asks for his name and the name of his mother and brothers, and the names of all his relatives, cousins, uncles, daughters, children and neighbors, no one left out, and then asked him an outrageous question: "Tell me how you practiced prostitution with your aunt, and how she asked you to do it to her anally. Is she the one who asked you or did you want it?" My body shook when I heard these words and I said to myself, "If they talk like that to a man, how will they talk to us?" The young man began to shout and said to him, "No, sir, I did not touch her." The interrogator screamed at him and grabbed him, threw him to the ground and hit him with everything, cables, boots, chair, table, everything. I heard his bones breaking on the ground, and the sound of his groaning; the detainee must remain silent and not cry in pain, scream or talk, because that means more beatings and torture, and it is forbidden to resist beatings or feel pain and say anything.

They had a very disgusting and horrible habit, the first thing they do when a detainee enters the branch, they ask the detainees to stand together behind each other. They cut a cartilage in the leg with a sharp machine, so that the pain remains for long days and the detainee cannot walk, and later it becomes inflamed; of course this is after they shave his hair and beat him, or open holes in their bodies, I do not know how they open these wounds, perhaps with a tool that is heated with fire and put on the body.

I saw many of the detainees with several openings in their bodies, circular openings the size of a coin, inflamed pus and colored red, black and blue; some of them had a broken hand or leg and a bone protruding; I saw swelling feet, as if blood had been trapped in them. Detainees intentionally cannot stand, crawl, or walk. The detainees suffer a great deal of pain. I saw some detainees with swollen faces, eyes, nose and lips looking like they had been strangled, to the point that the face was larger than the body, fingers or hands. The sights were terrifying and tormenting for us, and torturous for them.

The next day the jailer took me for interrogation, and the girls recommended me not to confess to anything, whether I did or did not do it. I told them that I did not do anything. I don't know where I got my strength from and I told the interrogator everything after he said to me "I hope you will tell me everything, what you did, and with whom you dealt, and I am here to hear you." I replied that I would tell everything that happened with me and added: "I hope you will not tell them because if they knew they would kill me." He had a paper and pen, I told him about the beating and humiliation and molestation, and everything that had happened with me in great detail. I gave him their names and descriptions, maybe he already knew what had happened with me. Then he threw down his pen and stood up and said to me "If you are lying, Hanadi, or you say that in order to appeal to me or to cause problems for the men, consider that this is the last day of your life." I told him "I swear to God, ask who you want, that is what happened to me and I swear they took me on false charges, I have nothing to do with anyone." He then asked me to go and said he would call me later.

Then they brought me back to solitary, and on the third morning they called me in, and they took me to the offices on the upper floors, and I said to myself there is a wall that separates life and death, life and hell, a wall that separates what is going on underneath, torture of detainees, and above where life and people don't know what's going on underneath. When I went upstairs to where life was, with offices and people, and everything was clean, it was as if the agents above were not the same ones who were torturing us underneath. They put me in an office and someone in civilian clothes came and told me "We know you're dealing with the fighters, and I hope I don't see you here again." Maybe he meant he didn't want to see me again in the region. I tried to talk but he told me not to say a word. He added "You are here to listen, not to speak." He told me to sign on a palm-sized paper, with a pledge on it, and I found my full name written, with a pledge that I am Hanadi ... I will not appear in any media, and I will not disclose anything that happened with me on this day, from assault and beatings, and will not talk about where I was, and would get out of al-Qadam area and not enter again, and will cooperate with the official authorities, and tell them about the militants, and I knew then that the interrogator had done this. I put my fingerprint on the paper, and he said to me "you will come out shortly," and at the door was waiting for me a colonel, the one who hit the men in the armored vehicle, and he said to me: "I

hope you forget everything that happened here, get out of here and do not talk about anything, and if your family asks you where you were, say that you were with your friend or neighbor, or tell them that you traveled or were lost, and not that you were in the branch, and don't talk to a single creature about what happened, we will know if you talk. I hope you will cooperate with me, and I will give you my phone number and tell me if you see any militants, and we will help you in everything." I said: "Colonel, I have nothing to do with them, I am afraid and forgive me I have my studies and I have submitted my papers and registered to join university, and I will study education and psychology, and I have no relationship with the militants and I'm far from knowing these things." Then he gave me 500 SP and said to me "This is the fare for the way, take a taxi and do not walk, go to your family and I do not want to see you again in this branch."

They opened the door and I left the branch on October 07, 2012. I didn't even see the girls, and I couldn't believe what had happened, how I got in and how I left. I took a taxi and went to my sister's house. My parents knew that I had been arrested, that I had remained in detention for three days. Everything was in an uproar at home, they were looking for me, some people told them I had been arrested and other said I had been killed. I had been missing for three days, I went out of my sister's house to photograph our bombed house and disappeared.

They worried about me a lot. I am the only single girl in the family, and my family thought that security took me and the camera, but I told them that I threw it away. My sisters began to admonish me for what I did. They said "The family's young men will be taken away because of you." They said "If you are not afraid for yourself, you should be afraid for your sisters, because of you we left our houses with the clothes on our backs." They thought that I "would cause them harm and security would harm them" and fled to different places. I didn't tell them what had happened to me, and they didn't ask me if I had been tortured and beaten. They blamed me because some of them lived in regime areas. They were afraid for their husbands. I was upset by this. They didn't know how much I had suffered. I expected someone to at least ask me if they had tortured me.

My sister kicked me out of the house after the discussion between me and her became heated, and after I said: "What did I do wrong that you did not ask about me, and blame me for things I have nothing to do with?!" She said "Leave this house, your presence is enough to bring us harm." I left the house at three o'clock at dawn, and no one followed me to bring me home. Everyone was fed up with me, because I would bring the security here and they would be arrested because of me. My sisters and their husbands were in the house. One of them was concerned her in-laws would hear that security had detained me.

I do not blame anyone, my sisters were right, and they should be afraid. Each of them has children and a husband. I saw the torture of the young men in prison and I feared for them, so I went out of the house because I did not want to bring harm to them, but they should not have kicked me out.

### **On the way**

I walked down the road and did not know where to go, I did not have money or clothes, I was crying and praying that God would find me a way out because I was

lost. I wanted a house just to shelter in, but there was no house as my father was in al-Qunaitra, and I did not have my ID, no money to go there. My father is very good and has forgiven me for everything, he is the only one who stood beside me and supported me. Everyone, even my brothers and sisters, abandoned me except for my father, my brothers threatened to disown me, and I heard very tough words that no one can bear, and I still have nightmares. What I went through could never be forgotten.

I stayed in the street, sitting on the sidewalk. I didn't know what to do or where to go. Suddenly a dog came at me growling, and I discovered I was sitting beside her pups. I ran and she ran after me, I went up some stairs and she followed and I knocked on a door. A lady opened and I said to her: "please let me in until the dog goes away." She let me into her house and said, "What's wrong sister?" and I asked her not to ask me before I rested. I didn't know what to tell her, should I tell her that my sister kicked me out of her house!

After I rested I told her that I could not speak and I thanked her. She insisted that she give me a glass of water and a cup of coffee, and she said to me: "What's wrong? You seem frightened, tell me, we are here to help each other out." I wanted to go, she replied, "At four in the morning, where are you going! Did your husband beat you?" I told her nothing and insisted on leaving.

I went back to the road in al-Mouhajrin area, the first avenue. I stopped to take shelter from the cold beside a car then sit in a secluded place so nobody would see me, and that's where I stayed until dawn. At that time, a man came to me and said "Get up, sister, I've been watching you for an hour. Come to my house and don't be afraid. My wife and children are at home." I entered his house after I found his wife standing in front of the door. I was scared and wanted to be warm, to rest and drink water. He told me, "Make yourself at home." Then he said, "What is your story? If you want to talk, I will listen to you" I replied that I could not speak, and he asked me if I needed money. I said "No, brother, I do not need." He took a hundred liras out of his pocket and gave them to me, he also gave me his phone number and said if I needed something, or needed work, [I should call]. He introduced himself and told me his name, and that he is the owner of a factory, and I thanked him and his wife and left.

My first plan was to go back to al-Qadam to take my bag, and I took a very long re-route so that I wouldn't walk in front of the checkpoint. I took the minibus sometimes. I reached my friend's house who had thought I'd died after I'd been missing for four days. I told her that security had caught me, then I took my bag and my belongings and left.

## **Ghouta**

My second plan was to go to Ghouta. At that time there was no siege yet. Security was not tight for those entering. I took side roads to avoid checkpoints. I arrived at Marj al-Sultan in the late evening on October 09, 2012, and I was very tired. I started to ask if there was someone to help me. The area was liberated and everyone was revolutionary, the atmosphere was revolutionary and I was a detainee, so people opened their homes and received me, many of them. I was very happy with the atmosphere. The women helped me and cooked for me, they prepared me a mattress to sleep. The women in Marj al-Sultan had been displaced from their areas. Then,

people came and told us that there was a raid coming from the airport road and that we had to leave. So I left with the families and we moved from Ghouta to al-Mazare. I stayed with the women. Life was beautiful despite the bombing. But suddenly we would hear that someone who was with us just yesterday died in the bombing, and that so-and-so had fled the place. Still, life was good. I treated the acute infections I had suffered in Branch 227 and people supported me. There were those who questioned my story, and were surprised how the regime had released me after three days, and they thought I was a spy, and it was difficult for me to accept this accusation.

My father was looking for me and asking my brothers about me, and saying to them I want to check on her, and they started calling my number, and I was not carrying a mobile phone but a phone SIM. When I managed to reach a phone I would put my card in and read my messages, so that my phone could not bear witness against me if I was caught again by security. I called my father and reassured him about me. He had heard that I was dead. Then my brothers told him I had visited them and left. They didn't tell him they had kicked me out so I told him what happened, that I left because they didn't want me there, and told him I was in Ghouta and that I would come to him at the earliest opportunity.

During Eid al-Adha, I was in the area of Irbin. I saw the bombing and fighting and the siege. I saw how the regime would bomb a building and reduce it to rubble. I saw how people fled when they heard the regime would storm the place. I lived with a family in Irbin. Despite the war, the women's lives went on there as normal. There was no trace of the Islamist movement that emerged later. The young men were respectable and belonged to the revolution. I did not enter Duma except as a passerby, and there was a Sharee court. Everyone knows that Duma is a conservative area, and people have their style of dressing and living.

Despite the bombing, people were trying to live their lives normally. We cooked, drank coffee and visited each other. The women loved me and treated me kindly and affectionately. One day, the lady who owned the house said: "Let's visit my neighbor, she has beautiful cats." We went, she had a lovely house and she did indeed have a blond Shirazi cat. I loved him and we played, and the neighbor said to me: "If you want I will give you a cat."

I once told one woman: "I'm embarrassed to tell you, but I want to cut my hair, trim my nails and fix my eyebrows. Is there any way?" So they took me to a woman who does these things. Despite the bombing we were trying to live a normal life.

It was time to leave, when the shelling intensified in November 2012, and people were fleeing, and the son of the family I was living was martyred. The father drove his family from Irbin, so the mother would not hear the news, because he was the eldest. She had another son detained. But she suspected something, and she always asked "Why doesn't he call me? Why doesn't he answer his phone?" I decided I had to go to my father, I could die or something happen to me. Death was all around. And I didn't want to watch the torment of this woman, because I had become very attached to her.

I left Ghouta after a week or ten days after Eid, it was cold, and I had no clothes or money, and tried to reach my father. I got onto a minibus and said to the driver: "Uncle, I do not have money and I lost my wallet. Will you give me a lift?" He said "Of

course, you are welcome." Next to me was sitting a young man who told him, "Uncle, I will pay for the lady." He paid the fare for me and tried to give me fifty liras.

We passed by several checkpoints, and it was the mercy of God that saved me so I could see my father. There was no scrutiny for women then as there was later. When he opened the door and saw me, he began to say "Why did you do what you did?" and asked me to stay with him and I was persuaded to leave everything and live with him.

My father was living with my brother and his wife, and he warned my brother before I arrived that he would not hurt me with a single word, and that he would not bother me at all. Indeed, my brother was careful not to upset me, they didn't want to lose me again. The problem was my family had heard bad things about me, especially from people who are neither with the regime nor with the opposition, who say, "Who knows where she went!" It's difficult for my brothers to hear such things, my family are very good and simple people and have accepted what I did. Only two of my brothers have not accepted me yet, and this is because I stayed in al-Qadam, and worked in the media, and I have a camera, and that people have been calling me a revolutionary, and saying I was inciting the demonstrations and confronting the regime and mingling with men in the field hospital.

I stayed with my father for about ten days, and then someone called me and said, "There is a field hospital, and it is necessary that you come for a temporary period of ten days, can you come to al-Qadam?" I told him I was with my father and couldn't work in the hospital because I was now weak and broken and couldn't see anyone injured anymore. He said there was a media office who needed a girl to report news and share videos.

I said goodbye to my father, who said to me: "Daughter, what do you want with these things? I swear they will kill you, everything is chaos. Stay here, I will give you all the money you need, if you want to work, work. Nobody will prevent you." I told him I couldn't, "The cause is in my blood. I will make you proud of me. When the regime falls, everyone who talked ill of me will fall with it." I told him many things. Those days were different. Then I left.

### **Al-Qadam, Once more**

I took advantage of the fact there was a road that had not been closed yet and I could pass on foot, and after I entered al-Qadam all roads were closed and the siege and fierce bombardment began, causing the death of many civilians, there was no more Internet and no electricity and no food, and chaos began, murder and betrayals, and I began to feel afraid for myself, I even started to fear the people I lived with and I began to close my door, and no longer tell anyone about my whereabouts. The chaos was great, and factions began fighting amongst themselves and disagreeing over money, I would hear that someone had money and was arrested, how was he arrested? Why are those with money arrested?

Later, it was found that money was being stolen, and many people appeared to be infiltrators, and slowly the presence of civilians began to decrease. I had come to this place for them, I was against weapons, I had nothing at all to do with that, and every street had someone responsible for it, someone ignorant, who had never studied,

began to control people and form groups, there were very nasty gangs. One of those gangs caught me and investigated me for two days, about twenty or twenty-five people, controlling a neighborhood, investigated me because they suspected me, and accused me immediately of being a spy, because I entered the branch and came out after three days, and they accused me of being on a mission the regime gave me, and this was like a dagger to my heart. They did not want someone like me to criticize and talk a lot, so they used religion and criticized my clothes and my makeup, although I do not use makeup or perfume; I respected myself and the place I was in, we were exposed to death at any moment. But they used my clothes as an argument because I was talking about the problems happening in the region, and I criticized them and say that we had diverted from our one principle and one heart and one cause, and this should not happen. I was like a thorn in their side.

In November 2012, I was in al-Kadam and there were no strange faces or foreigners, only Syrians. The hardliners and jihadists appeared because of the vacuum left by the withdrawal of intellectuals and university graduates from the region. I met many of them and their views were acceptable to the people, but unfortunately they did not stay, I saw many doctors who were participating in the field hospitals, but they left; that is, the educated class withdrew and none were left, and those who remained in the area were the exhausted and simple people who were wanted by the regime, so they were forced to take up arms. If they left the area they would die, and if they stayed they would die, and if a vacuum is left someone will come along to fill it. There were people whose minds were backward and who used religion to win the loyalty of the people present, and there was no guidance from any intellectuals, and no non-Islamic militants left with influence. At that time the path moved towards fanaticism, because there was no guidance from intellectuals, and those who were left behind were simple and easy to steer, we did not know the source of the weapons and how they came into the area, and we had nothing to do with it, because they began coming into the region in secret, and we did not know that battalions would be formed, we only knew that there was FSA. I was absolutely against weapons.

Unfortunately, Islamic slogans and names sprung up, like "Abu al-Bara Battalion" and "Abu Huzaifah Battalion," beards began to appear and men's robes became shorter. We started hearing radical sermons, that Sunnis are this and that. All these changes happened in a week at the end of November 2012. The Free Army, which was made up of defectors from the army who had come from different areas to the liberated areas, was ostracized, and fighting between these militant factions began and they were stealing from each other.

These changes were for me the straw that broke the camel's back, and I made a final decision to leave and live with my father, so I called him and said, "Come to take me and collect my things, I do not want to stay." I really started looking for a way out and took my laptop which held all my work, documentation and videos, and I also took my clothes and some of my devices such as Internet lines, and I left, thank God, during a gap in certain hours when they opened the barrier to civilians, and I went out with them, and fortunately I was not inspected and my father was waiting for me, and I thought it was all over.

My father wanted to go and see my sister who lives in al-Mouhajrin, but I refused to go with him and I said, "You go and I will wait for you and we will return home." I

decided to leave Damascus and never go back. My father went to busy some things and I got on a minibus, and the driver waited a long time for it to fill up with passengers. My heart was not at ease, I was hesitant to stay or get off the bus, but I stayed, and we reached a checkpoint, and I was the first person the agent asked for ID. I knew I was being monitored and they knew all my movements. I said: "My ID is not with me, I have my passport." He replied, "Give it to me" and told the driver to move. He didn't inspect anyone else. We moved, then they stopped us again with all the other cars at Midan gateway, and told the driver to move forward, until we reached the same point where they arrested me the first time, and the agent said that no one could get off the bus and everyone be silent. He took the IDs of everyone and searched the car with a device, and I realized I had fallen into their grip, and I feared the people in the car would pay for it, then they took the people off the bus and searched them one by one, and asked them to leave, except for me.

### **Second arrest - Branch 227 again**

They took me at the checkpoint, and I returned to torture. They started telling me, "Did you not repent, you come back again?" I told them I had not gone in [to the area], and started to make excuses. The officer came holding a walkie talkie and asked for my name. I told him and he hit me hard on my face, and said "Quickly, give me the names of your brothers." I told him and after every name he hit me harder, and when I finished he pulled off my hijab and threw it to the ground, then dragged me by my hair from the checkpoint to a school beside a carwash. They had turned it into a barracks. He dragged me across the floor for about seven or eight meters, and beat me very hard and continuously. I was begging him to hear me and he was telling me: "You are a whore, you work with the gunmen, and did not repent and lied to us, and you will not go out alive. You will confess what you did and how you brought in the weapons." He brought a pen and paper and said "Confess everything." I said "I will not speak a word," and he said to me, "Great, you preserve your rights," and he started beating me hard. Beside me was a man they caught before me and had beat him, his blood was all over the floor, I think he was dead from the torture because he was not moving. They kept beating me so hard that I no longer know where I was bleeding, my nose or my mouth, my face was swollen, and from the severity of blows to my face I could no longer hear anything with my ears. Then they turned my blouse inside out and put it over my face, and they tied my hands back and put me in the car with the young man who was thrown on the ground. I swear to God from the minute they put me in the car until we arrived at Branch 227 they continued to beat me, with hands and feet. Every checkpoint we went through, they were saying to me: "Traitor, bitch, whore," until even the person sitting next to me put his hand up as a barrier because they hit me so frequently. All this was because my name had been notified at all checkpoints and I had no idea. We got to Branch 227, and one of them hung my bag around my neck and started to drag me like an animal, telling me "this is what you are, you need a stable, you are a cow and you don't understand, you will see what we're going to do to you." He was hitting me, every time I passed someone they hit me. The day of my arrest was Wednesday December 05, 2012.



We arrived at Branch 227, and one of them hung my bag in my neck and started dragging me like a sheep ... like an animal, and he said to me, "This is your level, you need a barn." They beat me, and I was arrested on Wednesday, December 05, 2012.

As soon as I arrived, the person who took my effects asked me if I had certificates. I said, "I was studying at a secretarial institute." One of them said to me, "This is education, this is what you learned?" Then they brought me into the inspection room. A girl who had been with me before started to search me. She started crying and told me, "What did you do to yourself? Why did you come back here again?" The agent told her, "Search her and shut up." She searched me and said "She has nothing." But she warned me not to talk about anything and said "Be careful, the girls are not like us." Then they took me to the same solitary cell that I was in during my first arrest. I was scared they would raid my sister's house and find my laptop and harm all my family. It had documents, pictures of shelling, martyrs, pictures of the field hospital, pictures of the places where I was traveling, and there was a lot of information. I also documented my views during and after my detention, the names of detainees and torture. I photographed the bruises from beatings on my body after I came out of prison and wrote about the types of medications I took due to the diseases I suffered in detention. Later, eight months later, when I met my sister in Adra prison, the first thing I asked her was "Where is the laptop?" She said, "I broke it, when you didn't come home and we knew they arrested you." I cried hot tears, and was very sad because all my work had been lost; my sister broke it, I don't blame her, I know she broke it out of fear, in order to avoid security questioning, God forbid. I had a page on the Internet and I posted there, the documents I sent to the coordination units, and usually the Internet was weak and I could not upload materials to YouTube, so I sent materials to the media office in the southern region or people with aliases. We only knew each other online, and I think I made a mistake because I did not upload material online in my name. I later discovered during my detention that some activists were receiving money for the videos they uploaded. Every picture I filmed was extremely difficult and risky because of the shelling. I went after regime raids to photograph them. My friend and I documented the bodies thrown on the ground, I even photographed the cats that died from the bombing, and I was saying even the animals were not safe from the regime, and one time they shot dead cows and I photographed it. I documented everything, the camera was my weapon, but I found out from the girls in prison that the clips were being sold. Everyone was arrested, no one was left, and the prison became like a whole society, all classes of society were there, the intellectual and the illiterate and the ignorant. We were forced to live with those we loved and those we hated, with spies and good people and youngsters and the elderly; it was a whole society.

The real torture started on the third day. They took me to interrogation and began insults that no one can bear, telling me: "You are whoring with the gunmen," and since I entered the blindfold had caused my eye some pain and I could no longer see anything, and fell ill and they did not bring me medicine. During the interrogation, there were a number of interrogators, four or five, and one of them asked me to sit on the floor. Every time I spoke they hit me hard, they pulled my arms and legs and tried to break them. I was crying all the time and begging them saying "I swear to God I did nothing." Once when I swore to God I did not do anything, one of them raised the blindfold and he turned me towards the door and said to me, "Go, tie God outside and come back, here there is no God." I was very scared after this talk, not to mention the

beating and the great amount of insults. One of them took out a paper, they knew all my movements, and he said "Tell us how you brought weapons from Tadamon to al-Hajar al-Aswad." I told him, "What weapon!" I was shocked and said, "How am I going to smuggle a weapon into a liberated area?" I slipped and said the word "liberated" and he started beating me because I said that word, and I said: "Who am I to smuggle a weapon? Who would give me information about a weapon?" He said: "You are important to them, and if you were not important you could not enter and exit, and we know everything about you." I replied: "Our lives are not important, but cheap," and later after I left prison I knew their source. When I went to the Palestine Branch, one of the interrogators told me during interrogation that some young men confessed that I was bringing in weapons through an agent that facilitated the entry of ammunition and weapons, and there were other reports about me. They also had information that I was filming events and that in al-Qadam I was arrested by a gang for two days and interrogated, and the investigator showed me some of those reports. The first interrogation would continue for three hours and I did not change my words, but I almost collapsed from fatigue, and then they took me back to the cell.

The next day they called me for the second investigation, the same questions, but the number of interrogators dropped to two, and their questions began to increase, and they wanted names of young people and I could not give them any name of course, although the young people were in certain areas and they would not be able to arrest them, but it would be a death sentence if I gave them any name, and I gave them fake names, but the interrogator was not convinced and was saying: "I want names with the surnames, and I want the names of those who send and receive money and medicines."

I was trying to distance myself from the weapons charge, and I swore to him and said, "If you cut me up, I am ready to die, I have nothing to do with the weapons, I am afraid of a cockroach, how would I carry and smuggle a weapon!" I would repeat this sentence in every interrogation.

Two days later the third investigation became, my eyes were swollen and infected with ophthalmia, so I refused to put on a blindfold because it caused me inflammation, it was dirty and used on many and transmitted diseases. The investigator was cold and began with provocative questions, and wanted to know the source of money that was entering, of course I denied everything. The interrogator put the blindfold on my eyes despite my pain, and began to torture me, they put me on the ground on my knees, with my hands behind me and was I forbidden to lean or move my hands, and they brought electricity to electrocute me. I did not know what torture by electricity means, and the first electricity shock was in my leg, I was not wearing shoes, my body shook and I screamed. The electricity was very painful, I was screaming with my pain unconsciously, and I kept screaming whether I felt the pain or not, I screamed so hard, and he beat me and said "shut up," I wanted to annoy them with my screaming, and whenever he tried to shock me with electricity I was screaming and trying to stop him. "You will confess" he kept saying, until he asked the agent to send me back to solitary.

They took me back to solitary and I was screaming and crying, and the girls knew that they tortured me with electricity and told me that they heard my screams. I was begging the interrogator "For God's sake, don't electrocute me, I have nothing to do with it." I felt the pain in my body all night and the girls tried to take care of me.

The interrogations started at 9 or 10 a.m., and ended between twelve or two o'clock at night. You can't imagine how cold they were, like stone. The interrogator never tired, never sympathized, never believed anything. He never responded or heard anything. Every interrogator only wanted to speak and hear what he wanted to hear. Everything I said was met with one answer: "I don't want to hear it. I want names, names of gunmen, names not nicknames." And then he brought me a picture, it was a picture of a girl studying law, and she was with me inside. She had interviewed an American journalist in 2012 and he told me: "Confess about her." He brought a translated version of the article and said that her name is Hanadi and it was written in the south of Damascus, and he asked me: "You conducted the interview and put a picture of another girl to mislead us?" I said: "I did not do the interview, I do not know who the person in the picture is." he said to me: "You're talking to Americans now?" And here he brought all the names of my sisters with the names of their children, and he said to me: "I will bring all your sisters, and I will put you in one room. Stay stubborn and don't confess then." At this point, I became very weak and began to beg him and say: "Anything you want, I will do anything you want, I'm willing to kiss you boots and your feet, but leave my sisters alone, they have nothing to do with anything." He said to me: "Good, then tell me in detail." I started telling him the parts about myself and that involved me alone so that no one else would be hurt. I did my best not to talk about anyone and did not mention dates or names. He was asking me about food and the field hospital, I told him only what concerned me. He asked me about the girl "Where is she? Where are her parents?" after withdrawing his accusation that I was the interviewer. I said, "I do not know anything about them" and he said they have proof that she is my friend, but I repeated what I said, and he said to me: "Go" and I left.

The full name of the girl was written in the newspaper, that she was studying law and in her first year of school, in addition to her picture. The girl was in Tadamon, and I had met her for only half an hour. When he asked me about food in the area and what we were eating, I said, "There was a big kitchen where they cooked chicken and rice, and they distributed food to people to gain their affection." I don't know why I said that, it wasn't really true, perhaps to discourage him from asking other questions, in fact there was real hunger and bread was scarce and the presence of food such as vegetables, chickpeas and rice was rare, and the regime had besieged the area.

Later in one of the interrogations, he had my passport, and he told me, "If your passport is forged, you won't see the sun in your life." Of course it wasn't. Then he brought around twenty-four pictures of girls' IDs who were studying law in first year, he told me, "If you don't confess who Hanadi is who did the interview in the newspaper, I will bring them all and I will put them all in solitary." I no longer know what to say to him. If I told him about the girl they would bring her and torture her, and if I didn't they would bring all the girls and they were not to blame, and I would be responsible for it. I had to tell him and I told myself Hanadi has heard about my arrest and she will take precautions, she will protect herself, especially as she was in an area safe from the regime, and basically, her name is in the newspaper, and I was obliged to tell. I told him: "This is Hanadi" He asked "Do her family have anything to do with it?" I said "No, she ran away from her parents' house. They are fanatics and want to kill her." He asked me about her father's name and place of residence. I said I didn't know her family or where they live, her family were all sick and her brothers were mentally ill, to remove suspicion. He wrote the information, and Hanadi became wanted.

There were many interrogations, and every day he asked me new questions and charged me with new charges. The old ones were repeated, like, "What were you doing, and with whom are you dealing?" There were new ones, for example once he accused me of bringing girls and giving them religious lessons in the mosque, then we moved to religious workshops in the houses; I said to him: "I don't even do my prayers how would I go to the mosque, I wish I did." Then he moved to questions about money, and he wanted to know the source of money. I replied: "This is much bigger than me, and no one talks about it." He asked me about the source of the medicine. I answered that it was one of the pharmacies whose owners left the area. The medicines were for first aid purposes only.

On the last day of the interrogation, I raised the blindfold and read the name of the interrogator who was responsible for interrogating me. He was a sergeant named Hazem, I don't remember his surname. He was responsible for questioning the men. I was the only girl he questioned. There was another interrogator for women. Later, I concluded that interrogators were aware of body movements. For example, when a detainee scratches his nose, the interrogator knows that he is lying. This is what an interrogator told me in Branch 215.

On one occasion, the interrogator was very calm and gave me a cigarette. He asked me if I wanted coffee or tea. I said, "I don't smoke." He replied, "our bad, we couldn't put pressure on you." I learned later that to torture a detainee, if a person is addicted to smoking, they light a cigarette in front of them, and say to him: "If you confess, we will give you a cigarette and a cup of tea," This has happened with many. Then he began to talk to me calmly and said to me: "I will ask you a question, what have you benefited from all this, the President remains despite you and you are the losers and you will die." I said "I want to ask you, when I will leave here? You questioned me, don't you know everything now?" He said "It is not up to me, it is up to your people, the negotiating body is responsible and they should ask for you, and they should mention your name. Do you have any doubt that they will ask for you?" I said, "I don't know what the negotiating body means, I don't know if they will ask for me or not, I don't get into politics, I'm a simple person, I was reckless, I was unaware of the situation, and caught up in my emotions." I tried to convince him that I didn't have any political views, and then he asked me, "Do you have anyone outside the country?" I replied, "No," and he said, "Why do you have a passport?" I said, "I want to travel to Turkey, and get leave the country and the shit." And here he became like a madman and hit his hand on the table, and started calling me an agent and traitor, and said: "You all want to bring in Turkey." I don't know why I mentioned Turkey, it was stupid of me because that alone is a charge. I tried to explain and said I just wanted to travel to rest and withdraw. He went back to being calm and started to ask the same questions about food, I gave made-up replies, far from reality. Then I went back to solitary.

The number of women in solitary began to increase on a daily basis, every day there was a new detainee, we had nine women, one of whom was pregnant, and one with epilepsy, and a woman with diabetes aged sixty years, and there was a fifteen-year-old girl, and three young girls, one of them from Zabadani from a well-known family there, studying media, arrested from her university after her colleague wrote a report about her, and the place became very tight, so we slept in turn, some sleeping from morning to evening, and others from evening until morning. The space was equivalent to a

single blanket, and the door was thick and black, the ceiling very low, while in the prison the ceiling is very high. Solitaries were distributed in the form of a maze, and there was a very small hole in the shape of a rectangle, and a "bulb" illuminated day and night, a yellow light, and we did not see the sun or know night from day, and with the passage of days we began to know the time from the distribution of meals and times of interrogation and extracting detainees to take to court. We knew the times they changed jailers and distinguish them from the sounds of their footsteps and the smell of their perfume.

Unfortunately, there were many problems in the solitary. The fifteen-year-old girl was taking hallucinogenic pills and told us that she had taken with her to the branch an envelope of these pills, and that the interrogator exploited her, took her out of the cell and brought her back drunk, telling her that he loved her and would take her out of prison. .

It was very disgusting. We had no sanitary pads, we would rip our blue jail robes and use them. We didn't dare say we were ripping our robes because we would be punished. We would wait to be given a new robe while ours were filled with blood, because we were sitting next to each other. We asked for a new robe every two weeks, under the pretext of a new detainee arriving, but later we asked the jailer for pads or even cloth paid for by those who had money, but they refused, sometimes the jailer would have pity on us when he saw us covered in blood, the smell spreading, and gave us gauze, but it was not enough. It was more than disgusting. The cell was so tight we slept on top of each other and our clothes were all covered with blood.

I remember another very disgusting incident in Branch 215. We had a girl who had a bowel infection and started screaming and asking the warden to open the door to go to the bathroom. She said she had diarrhea but he refused because there were detainees there. She soiled herself and we were all drowning in feces, and we started screaming and saying, "Are we animals!" The girl cried and felt embarrassed, but we told her it was not her fault, it was their fault.

I used to be ashamed to say that I had my period, but in prison we screamed and beat the door and told the prisoner we want pads and want to go to the bathroom, one time I had strong spasms from the severity of the cold and bad food, and began to scream and beat my stomach and beat the walls, I asked them for a pill, and no one responded to me and they did not give me a pill.

I remember one Friday, after the news of an epidemic in the branch, maybe tuberculosis, the jailers feared the epidemic, and for their safety, they forced the detainees to bathe on a Friday, they took them out like sheep, handcuffed, they took every five or six individuals together. The bathrooms were in three sections where they distributed the groups, three toilets, and a washbasin. The water was scalding hot. The toilets were always overflowing. But they still made us use them. We were not allowed to shower after using the toilet lest we perform ablutions. The jailer controlled us at his will. If he was in a good mood he would let us wash our faces. He always stood in front of the toilet door, and we were not allowed to stay for more than a minute or two. He beat the door and said, "Come on, what happened to you?" He stood behind us when we washed our hands so we would not to perform ablutions. Praying was strictly prohibited. Anyone who was caught praying was severely punished, they struck her on

the feet or somewhere else. Abu Samuel's famous saying was "You want to curse us? You know God now? We will tread all over your god."

Abu Samuel was a permanent drunk, especially at night, he selected very beautiful young women, and treated them with humanity, although no detainee was distinguished from the other in terms of food, drink or pads, but the exception is in the treatment, for example, he called detainees "whore" and "bitch." But those who he treated specially he would not call them those words, but flirt with them. In the beginning he said to me: "What did want from all this, you're still a young girl." When we were going to the bathroom, he put his stick on my body and I pulled away. The stick was always in his hand. He was provoked the most by my friend Mai, who is from Syria and currently resides in Germany, a pharmacist and she has a dispensary, she was always criticizing and going on strikes and cursing them and refrain from eating, and slam the door strongly and ask them all the time: "Why am I here!"

On one occasion she swallowed iron pieces and they took her to the hospital. He always beat her with his stick, and her interrogations were very long, she was educated and tortured her a lot. Every morning she prepared herself and stood in front of the cell door. One morning she was hysterical, and she started banging on the door. She was hysterical, screaming and crying and saying to them: "Get me out, what do you want from me? I want my children." The jailer told her the first time: "Go inside, you're not leaving" and the second and third time he said to her: "If you don't shut up you will go downstairs" and then dragged her and began to beat her and took her downstairs, where they tortured her until she lost consciousness and they kept her there.

In the branch there was harassment and violations of the body. Rape cases were mostly in checkpoints and headquarters, such as the headquarters of the Shabiha. During my imprisonment I did not see or hear of rape in the branch, and it was forbidden for any agent to know our names or exchange conversations or have any contact with detainees. If that happens the agent or detainee is punished and this is overseen by Abu Samuel. It was also forbidden for male and female detainees to have contact.

They were afraid of the strikes; one time I went on strike for five days without food or drink, and when I was unconscious the girls started screaming, and told the prisoner that I was sick and had not eaten for five days, and did not tell him that I was on hunger strike, so as not to punish me, so the jailer brought me sweets and garlic. The girls put the pieces in my mouth and then gave me salted yoghurt. The reason for my strike was the torture during my interrogation and the bad food, which I could not eat because it was disgusting, dirty cold and uncooked soaked rice, and the smell of the broth was nasty and it was cold. Vegetables are cooked with their dirt, for example, and they do not use oil or fat in cooking, only boiled vegetables, the bread is stale and old and full of mold, potatoes are hard and green in color, and food bland, they refuse to give us a little salt, and with low sugar levels in our bodies we needed something sweet.

### **Women, a Winning Card**

They feared the strikes because women in prisons were a bargaining chip used by the regime to negotiate, they could have killed us as they killed the men at a glance, but

despite our torture and not giving us medicines when we got sick they were afraid for our lives. If any female detainee had a fighter brother, she became a pressure card on her brother. If there were negotiations or exchanges, she became a pressure card when women are demanded to be released. When I was in Adra prison my name was mentioned several times in the exchanges, which delayed my exit, when the regime knows that someone is in demand, it delays their release to take advantage of them. As is happening currently with one of them.

In the "Nuns Swap" my name was in the exchange, the second among the names, and my name appeared in the media, but they did not release me because the issue of reconciliation in al-Qadam area began to move ahead, and they wanted to use me to benefit more, why let me go out in the exchange? I was there and I worked in the field, and everyone knew it.

### **Leaks from inside the branch**

When Abu Samuel was absent for a while, the door of the cell was opened by a jailer named Abu Jaafar. I dared to ask him, "Why is the interrogator no longer asking for me? I want to know when I'm going out of here." He asked me, "What is the name of your interrogator?" I said "Abu Ali," an hour later they called me for an investigation, and they did not put a blindfold on me, and there were three agents sitting behind the desk, two sitting next to each other, and another sitting with one foot on the table and the other on the ground, and two standing in front of the door and another sitting on a chair. The same interrogator who had interrogated me before tore up several papers and told me: "This is your file, and I tore it up and tore up your confessions. And now I will start over with your investigation." I started to beg and said "I didn't do anything," he said to me, "I want to know with which of the agents here you work with?" I said, "I swear to God, I do not speak with any agent. We are forbidden to talk to them, and even when we are talking to each other, the girls in the cell, Abu Samuel knocks on the door and tells us to be quiet, how would I ask for your name!" He replied: "No, there are leaks coming out of the prison and I want you to confess." I discovered later that there were leaks published on the Internet with our names and that we were in this branch and the dates of our arrest, in addition to the name of those tortured, through one of the agents. No one knew about our presence in this branch. They had suspected me because I knew the name of the interrogator. Then he asked me, "How did you know my name?" I said, "One time, during interrogation, someone came in and said to you: 'Abu Ali have you finished?'" When the jailer asked me the name of the interrogator I said Abu Ali."

The jailer was despicable. He knew the name of the interrogator but wanted to test that I knew his name, although they never use their real names, they use nicknames, and they only want to hear 'Sir.' I never called any of them Sir and that annoyed them, and when I had to I would say, "Mr. Detective."

Investigators were afraid anyone would know their names because they feared reprisals, because systematic killings and deliberate killings under torture occur through the interrogator and under him an executioner; the jailer is an employee and a tool, he opens the door and closes it and takes us to for questioning. The interrogator is responsible for the killing. He interrogates at night with two or three agents, he sits in a

chair in front of a table, and sometimes the torturer is one of the old prisoners forced to do so, or willing to take this role in order to get himself out of detention, and we distinguished the real torturer from the prisoner by their appearance, the latter would be bald and thin with lacerations on his body.

Then the interrogator began to ask me what we talked about in the cell, and I said, "Nothing, there is a sixty-year-old, and another pregnant, and there is a patient with epilepsy, and there is one you took who left her son at the age of four months, and another whose chest ache won't let her sleep, who wants to talk?" Frankly, I was in a place where I could not trust anyone, and I did not talk about anything personal, I felt a tightness in my chest, but I could not say that I missed my family or my father, I cried while I was sleeping, and did not cry in front of anyone so as not to exploit my weakness, and I was scared.

### **Deadly Nightmare**

The voices of the detainees at night were a deadly nightmare, and we all wished we could not hear anything. The detainees were tortured beside our room, and no one could imagine our pain for them. I remember the voice of a young man in his twenties. He would scream while they tortured him "Mother, please help me, I'm dying, mother please" He tasted death, the torture was so severe. Later, we heard the story of his mother, she was in a cell in the branch, she had been arrested with him, she could hear him as he was being tortured, she was from Deir ez-Zur countryside, and they arrested them because she had tried to smuggle him out of the army and take him to the country, dressed in women's clothing. But they were discovered and detained, and later I met her in Branch 215, and we shared information while we were in the bathroom, during the spread of scabies, where we cleaning the cell with petrol on a Friday. We were ill for two days from the smell.

On one occasion, when Abu Samuel took us to the bathroom, there was a detainee in his forties, dying from the severity of his torture with electrocution, foam coming out of his mouth, he was so lean that his bones were visible, he was thrown on the floor in front of the toilet, naked. Abu Samuel asked us to step on his neck, one after the other, so he would die, and of course we did not, and we refrained from going to the bathroom. I froze when I saw him, I would see it in my dreams for six months every night, when I closed my eyes I saw it, whenever I went to the bathroom I remembered, and Abu Samuel told us his story. He was stealing gas!

Another time, there was a young military man, I don't know exactly whether he defected or wanted to defect. During his confinement, he said that he would retaliate against the regime when he left. One of the people in the room told the jailer. He took him out of the cell and put him on the ground and three agents started to beat him with batons, the plastic ones as hard as bone. We were in the bathroom and they immediately told us to go out and go back to the cell, and while we were going we saw the young man thrown on the floor, wearing blue jeans and a bomber jacket. Someone was saying to the young man: "You want revenge? We will show you revenge." They beat every inch of his body, and we heard the sound of his breaking bones, and I think the first blow and the strongest was to his head, and the young man did not make any sound or scream, only we heard the sound of his grunts, and after



that we kept hearing the sound of breaking his bones for an hour and the young man remained thrown to the ground. We knew the names of the agents who did it because they were boasting and saying their names and addresses out loud, saying "I'm Abu Bassel, do what you can, I live in..." And another agent is called Abu Jaafar. They took out the "slaves" who brought water to clean the floor of his blood, then they brought us out of our cell. We only saw the man's jacket full of blood, and it was clear that the young man had died.

The last time the interrogator called me, he asked me to fingerprint a paper, and he told me that I would leave here to another branch, and then to the court, and you might go to the women's prison. "Here we have finished the investigation with you, tell the judge that you confessed under beating and torture" I did not believe what he was saying to me and I said to myself: "Maybe he wants to scare me and poison my joy that I'm leaving."

In the morning, as usual, we were waiting to go out of the branch, and the agents came and took a group of women, I did not go out with them, for the first time I cried burning tears, and I realized that I will not leave there in my life. I saw a lot of women come in and leave, except me and Salma. Even after I left the branch, Salma stayed there for about a year and a half. She was released and did not go to Adra Prison because she was a police-woman. She was expelled from her work and went to her village. Salma was tortured a lot at first. Later, the jailer was relatively lenient because she was from the military corps. They were afraid she would teach us how to behave during the interrogation. She would tell me "Whatever they do, torture and electrocute you, don't say anything and don't be afraid, because if you say something it will get harder for you." She was telling us about her dissident cousin, who they executed in Sednaya prison before the revolution; he was in America and the regime gave him safe passage to return to Syria, but they arrested him immediately when he returned and executed him after forty days, and forbade his father from giving him a funeral, and she was afraid they'd execute her as they did with her brother, and kept telling us: "you will all leave but me, and because I am an Alawite my punishment is double."

Branch 227 was a branch of the military security, and most of those inside around us were punished and defected soldiers, officers of the rank of lieutenant colonel, major, lieutenant and non-commissioned officers, and there were no civilian detainees. I can remember one officer called Wassel from al-Safsafah, and one from the Tlass family. The officers had special treatment. For example, they did not bathe with other civilian detainees, but they bathed alone for fear they would make contact with them, and they learn something about them or from them, especially that they have special influence and information. But the so-called "Bassel. A" was always insulting them. I remember once that he beat and humiliated a high-ranking military officer and said to him: "You and your rank, you traitor," but they punished him later. We knew this because he was absent about ten days after that. We know that those who are absent from the branch are either punished or moved elsewhere. I believe that anyone who investigates or tortures any detained officer needs to have a higher military rank. I don't know the military rank of Bassel, because they wear civilian clothes, and sometimes they wear military pants, he was about thirty-eight years old, very slim, average length, gray hair bald at the front, he drank alcohol at night, and in the day he remains angry and provocative. If a woman asks him to open her cell door, he does, and if one of them

asks for washing powder, or salt or bread, usually he would bring it. He is primarily responsible for killing young men in Branch 227, he has the authority to kill. He boasted after killing any detainee, saying, "I'm Bassel. A from Jableh, and I live in 86, and whoever wants something from me, let him come." They had the power to kill without any problem.

There were three underground floors in the branch and the air extractors were working day and night without interruption. Electricity was never interrupted while on the outside it was cut off.

I remember well at the beginning of my interrogation on December 05, 2012, the interrogator showed me a very small piece of paper on which was written in pen: "The interrogator is not responsible for the death of any detainee during the interrogation." He said: "Do you see, even if you die here, you are like a cockroach I stepped on"

### **Torture Party**

We had a "party" when a new batch of detainees came to the branch and Bassel A was creative in their torture. They shave their hair completely, humiliate them and beat them after they are lined up and faced to the wall. The beating increases if anyone makes a sound or says a word, and beatings are either with black cables or sticks with one thick end wrapped in thick rubber and black in color, as I mentioned earlier used to cut a cartilage in the leg and break the bones of detainees, and plastic pipes for sanitary installations, which they use in torture and call "Lakhdar Brahim." I didn't see this in this branch but I saw it at checkpoints and in Branch 215, a 5 cm diameter pipe, the lightest tool they use for torture.

There was a large area like a square called the "collective," considered a yard for torture, and there pipes on the ceiling, with chains and tools to tie hands and legs, and an electric chair, electric sticks and drums of water in which detainees are drowned in order to suffocate and fill their lungs with water, and if the detainee does not die, he will inevitably get sick. We were watching these things on our way to interrogation, but later I deliberately tried not to look, because the scene is very scary.

During one of the interrogations, the investigator asked me about the relief money. I had received more than one money order from my friends living in Kuwait. The amounts were very little, no more than thirty-five thousand SP. The money transfer agencies were collaborating with the regime and telling them about the transfers. I told the investigator that they were my personal allowance which I received from my relatives in Kuwait, but he replied that I didn't want to confess and told me to take off my clothes. I was wearing a woolen jacket and jeans, and the jailer took me to the bathrooms where there was a blue barrel, larger than me and filled with cold water. The weather was icy, I heard the investigator tell one of the agents that small pieces of snow had fallen on his clothes, and he was shaking his clothes. He took off the blindfold and started putting my head into the barrel of water, but I resisted strongly, then he called for them to fill a bucket with cold water and poured it over my head, then he poured a bucket of hot water over my head. The water was not boiling hot like the water they poured onto the men. Then he opened the blouse that I was wearing and bared my chest and poured water on it. I kept on screaming and tried to escape to

the corridor and he caught me and tied my hands and put a blindfold over my eyes, and then put me in the corridor under the cold air fan. "I will leave you here until you die." I was barefoot, and whenever I tried to sit on the floor, the jailer screamed at me, and I stayed there shivering from the cold, until I fainted. I don't know how long I was there but when I awoke I found myself in the room shivering and blue with cold, and the girls took off my wet clothes to dry them. Each of them gave me an item to wear and dressed me, and it took four hours for me to get back to normal.

### **The rooster ... Abu Samuel**

The situation of our underwear is similar to the story of sanitary napkins, we asked them to buy us pads and underwear, with the money they had taken from some women prisoners, but they refused, throughout our detention we stayed in the same underwear, and in the bathroom on Friday we were allowed to wash our clothes and then wear them wet. Me and a friend would hold an item of clothing on both ends and squeeze it well to be able to wear it, and anyone wearing two pieces under her coat would lend one to another girl until her clothes are dry. It was forbidden to close the thick iron bathroom door during our shower, and Abu Samuel saw us naked, and those of us trying to close on entering were beaten with a stick. It was prohibited for any agent to stand in front of the bathroom door while we bathed except Abu Samuel, and when he is sick or on vacation we don't bathe, he acted as if he was our boss. They gave each of us half a soap, a very small sachet of shampoo, a nylon dish sponge, a small amount of laundry detergent, like a small tea cup, and they also gave us petrol to spread in the cell for lice and scabies. We did not have head lice, but we had them on our bodies, and we would say to each other: "Even lice is against us," because it was very troublesome.

This branch was very cruel, and the days were horrible and I pray to God to lose my memory and forget those days, and not remember anything of what happened. Once I remember it, I find myself automatically sitting in a corner, and I cannot cry or do anything, and life stops for me, we suffered a lot, I stayed in this branch for sixty-five days and I was interrogated nineteen times.

### **Branch 215**

I thought I was going to go home, but the interrogator transferred me to Branch 215, as a deposit because Branch 291 had no room for girls. I asked the young man who they took me with where he was from. He replied that he was a university student from the al-Midan area. When he saw him talking to me he was beaten and cursed. Then they put us in a long white military vehicle, they tied my hands and blindfolded my eyes. We reached Branch 291, and they put me in a dormitory for three hours. A dirty, smelly room full of small cockroaches, and an agent came and started cursing me: "Bitch, whore of the gunmen, prostitute." They had not fabricated the charge of "Jihad al-Nikah" at that time. Then they took me in the car to Branch 215, to the security square, a square courtyard surrounded by buildings, eucalyptus trees and gasoline motorbikes the confiscated, then they took me to Sharshabeel's room. His name is Ahmad Alia, known as Sharshabeel, an old man, retired and honored by posting him in this place, a bald stupid bureaucrat, a fanatic of the Baath Party and Hafez al-Assad and his group, more loyal to him than to Bashar al-Assad, he talked a lot about Hafez

al-Assad repeating : "If you were here at the time of Hafez, you would not be alive, but the leader is gentle with you, and therefore you are alive," meaning Bashar al-Assad. All the pictures in his room were of Hafez al-Assad, some of them self-portraits, and a selfie with Hafez, the Sharshabeel room was pre-manufactured and smelled of stinky smoke, and there was a heater on the floor.

Then he took me to the sixth floor, where an interrogation room was located in a very long corridor with many interrogation rooms, the atmosphere was very quiet, and I did not smell the smells that I smelled in Branch 227, but lighter smells, the place was for administrative investigation without beatings or torture. There was on the side of the room where I was supposed to enter a paper that reads "It is forbidden to enter any kind of weapon," and I was relieved.

Then he brought me to a big office with red curtains, then closed the curtains and told me to get undressed. I told him, "Sorry, take off what!" He replied, "Take off all your clothes, quickly, you will be searched." I said, "I just came from a branch, why are you searching me?" He said: "I do not trust my own father," and I began to swear to him that I had nothing with me, but he remained insistent and said that I lie and that we, the prisoners, are bringing in blades and SIM cards and mobile phones, and he came himself and lifted my blouse and started to shake it. And of course he saw my breasts, there was no harassment, but the purpose was to insult me, then he took down my pants, I was very ashamed and my nerves broke and I collapsed and started cursing him secretly. Then he brought me to a collective room on another floor, where there were girls and the atmosphere was different. The faces of the girls were calmer, and the place was clean and warm with thick blankets, and there was a small window surrounded by wire grids at the top of the wall from which the sun came in, and they could tell night from day. Later I would climb up to see the world, we could not see anything through the window but the sky. There were twenty-four girls, and there I met Faten Rajab and Duaa Mohammed and others from Deir ez-Zur, Damascus and Aleppo. I do not recall which day I was transferred to this branch.

I isolated myself from the girls and did not talk to any of them, they made fun of me, and they did not like my appearance, and began to spread rumors about me and say that I am a witch and I practice astrology and bad things, because one time one of them told us about a dream she had had, and I interpreted it to her, and told her that she would leave here. I kept to myself and my prayers. One of them was working in a canteen and had met a young man from Midan in the Free Army. Security asked her to facilitate his capture and she did. I do not know why they arrested her. She had nothing to do with the revolution. And we also had a respectable teacher from Damascus who taught in Ruken al-Din, and another was a university student from Jobar studying Sharia, and we also had a dentist, and others.

I stayed in this branch and in that room twenty-eight days, and we were allowed a lot of things, such as access to the bathroom whenever we wanted, and the room had a towel and a Quran, and the food was cleaner, the same as the food of the previous branch but more cooked, and they give us every Thursday chicken, nothing like the chicken we know. I remember that now and laugh, it was "tough and small" and boiled without being cleaned, raw and smelled bad, and I gave my share of meat to the girls, because I could not eat it. The share was one chicken to three girls. Our breakfast of tea and yogurt was at 6 a.m.

The strange thing is the disappearance of body odors even when bathing was delayed, and I do not know what the secret is! For example, I did not bathe in Branch 215 because there was no bathroom, there was a shower in the corridor, and if one wanted to use it, she would use the help of another detainee to cover her so she could bathe, but I did not feel obliged to do so. Still, I had no body odor.

### **Rehab Allawi**

A week after entering Branch 215, they brought in a girl who was wonderful and had beautiful features and a strong personality, she came in laughing and mocking the jailers, and was wearing pajamas with teddy bears or red roses. Hope she is resting in peace, she was Rehab Allawi, the one who influenced my life the most and changed me. She was positive, compassionate and strong, and despite her arrest she was strong, we didn't feel that we were in prison. She was a civil engineering student, we became friends and she only slept in my lap. Sometime after she came, she fell ill due to a virus, like all the girls, all of them had diarrhea, vomiting and fever. I and two other girls were the only ones who did not get sick, maybe because I fell ill when I was in Branch 227. Faten Rajab asked the jailer to take her money and bring her medicine, but he refused and brought paracetamol, which did nothing, she needed antibiotics; somehow we were able to bring medicine and injections, we gave another jailer a thousand liras Syria for the medicine, and he took ten thousand SP for every injection. The money was among the personal effects of some girls, because the health situation had become disastrous, but I did not have money, and my only effects were a handbag and some personal items.

I cared for Rehab because I loved her since she entered and became attached to her, and during her illness I wiped her body when she sweat, I took care of her because she was young and innocent. At first, she did not tell us her story, but she told me about her family, her mother and father and brothers, after we stayed up together for several nights, she told me she was helping with relief.

She was like a butterfly among us, inspiring her with her positivity. She was young and kind to everyone, everyone liked her, even the jailers liked and respected her. She would always say "I'm a Bedouin." She used to live in Barzeh area in Tishreen neighborhood, and most of the people in this neighborhood were Shabiha. There was one man from al-Qardahah who was responsible for a real estate office. He had a warehouse where he killed and tortured whoever he wanted in broad daylight. An FSA member approached her to help catch him, not to kill, but to use in exchanging prisoners. I swear by the Quran, for her, that her only intention was a prisoner swap. She called him from her phone and met him in a car, then they came and took him at gunpoint. They beat her and pushed her out of the car to show she had nothing to do with the matter. And then they killed him.

Three days later, the family of the Shabih who was killed, following her phone number, surrounded the building where she lived with armored vehicles, entered the house with weapons and broke the door, and arrested her. In the house were her sister and brother-in-law, her mother and younger sister. Rehab did not know they had arrested her mother and brother later, then let them go after a while. They confiscated computers and telephones and found out the whole story, including that Rehab lured

the Shabih. His entire family was Shabiha and officers in the security branches. Even the interrogator who questioned her was a relative and told her: "I swear to dispose of you as my cousin was disposed, and the whole world will see you dead." She was investigated in less than ten days.

Two or three weeks after I left the prison they took Rehab from the branch and she disappeared. I also learned when one of her brothers contacted me that the group who killed the Shabih issued a statement. They did not exchange detainees. They filmed a video of how they tortured and killed the Shabih, and then they broadcast it and threw his body into an orchard in Barzeh. The group received funding because they seized and killed the Shabih. Al-Aroor was proud of the statement they had issued and praised the men. Later, I learned that this group committed disgusting things like prostitution and drugs and had a relationship with the regime.

I remember after I came out of detention that Rehab's brother was crying like a child and he was telling me: "They lost the girl." So far her family is not convinced that she died, and the regime has demanded twenty-million SP for her release. Rehab confessed that the incident occurred in spite of her, and the investigator told her that she would be transferred to the field court and there they would decide. She, Faten Rajab and Duaa Muhammad were the only ones among us in the room to face a field court. Later, they changed Duaa Muhammad's file, she remained for about three years in Branch 215.

After I left prison, for a whole year I waited for Rehab to come out of prison, until someone told me that she had, but I did not believe it because she faced field court and would not be released. If she goes out it is either to the grave or to be transferred to Adra prison, and she was not transferred to Adra. But after a while I learned that they took her from 215 at night, and told her to pack her things because she would go home, usually they do not tell any detainee that she will go home, but they said it so the others would hear that she had left. They took her to Branch 293 and she was there for a while, then fell ill during torture and under psychological pressure. Her torture was supervised by one of the female delegates in the branch, female collaborators who volunteer to work in the branch. Rehab knew her before and they were related. After she fell ill, they took her to the military hospital and her brother paid twenty-million SP so they would give her an injection of some sort to stop her heart and make it look as if she was dead, and issue a medical report, after which she would be smuggled by coffin, and delivered to her brother in Lebanon. And so the brother paid this amount to a person from Branch 215.

But they lied to her brother. I don't know how they killed her, strangled, medical neglect, or maybe they gave her something. I don't know but she was suffering from a chronic disease. Her picture appeared on the internet among the ones taken by "Caesar" seeming as if she had put on weight when she was in the branch, I think they gave her an air needle or hanged her.

One of the nurses in the military hospital knew Rehab, who was from her own home in Deir ez-Zur. He saw her bound hand and foot to the bed. She said to him "tell my family I am dying, they are torturing me and want to kill me." He saw her after she died, and he later defected and told her parents. There is something mysterious about

the way Rehab was killed. Her picture shows there was a needle inserted in her hand and there was a blue coloration near her mouth.

Then they told her brother that she came out of detention and was in Lebanon, before the appearance of the "Caesar" pictures. Indeed they took her identity and recorded her entry by land to Lebanon, her brother confirmed the matter, and also found that she had not left Lebanon, so he insisted that she was still alive even though I told him that it was a lie arranged by the regime, since the suggestion to her colleagues in detention that they were taking her to her house, even logging her entry into Lebanon. Then they started telling her brother that Rehab was afraid of being killed by her family because of rumors about her and her family was a clans. I know Rehab could not say this, and I also know that her family could not hurt her. After my departure to Istanbul, her family asked me if that was true and whether she was afraid of them, before the pictures of "Caesar" spread, and I confirmed to them it was a lie, and assured them that she cried at night, longing for them.

After some time, news arrived to her brother that he had to leave Syria because he was wanted by the regime, and he has already left, and the whole family is wanted while they are outside Syria, and her family still lives under the weight of debt and psychological pressure. I now try not to communicate with them because I am tired myself when I communicate with them, although I like talking to her mother. I told Rehab's story because people should know what happened to her.

At the beginning of 2015, someone brought Rehab's photos, and I didn't know yet about Caesar's pictures. When I saw them, it was like a sword that split me in half. I said, "There is no God but God, why is Rehab here?" He told me: "Check carefully the pictures, is it Rehab? Ask your friends" I replied: "Yes, Rehab, certainly Rehab, and the shawl she wears is mine, I took her shawl and I gave her mine." They killed her.

Before Caesar defected and the pictures leaked, I spoke in one of the interviews that there would come a day and someone would come out and talk about the atrocities committed by the regime. After defecting and publishing the pictures, a number of journalists communicated with me. They thought I knew Caesar, I don't know him, but of course I was sure that our oppression and torment would be like a curse that would haunt the regime.

### **Faten Rajab**

Faten was arrested on December 26, 2011, and remained in the Air Force Branch for more than a year, and was initially number (1) there, and was banned from everything, and she then transferred to Branch 215, and then to Adra prison and then took her to Sednaya and executed her. Nothing is certain however. The regime will not say that she was executed, but evidence suggests that any girl they take to Sednaya will be executed, and in the future there will be photos and evidence showing how the girls were executed.

Faten's story is similar to the story of Rehab. The battalions facilitated her arrest. Faten was one of the influential people in the revolution. She worked as a medical and relief doctor. She is a doctor at the university in physics. Everything that was said that she was a nuclear and atomic scientist or had anything to do with developing weapons

was a lie. I believe if she wasn't arrested they would later have assassinated her in Duma, because she was against the battalions formed in Duma, and the evidence is that her name was not mentioned in any exchange and was not claimed by the battalions in Duma, and they were an indirect reason in her arrest and facilitated her arrest. Who knew what was with her in the car, where she was going, and when she went? To give that information and to arrest her in an ambush with bags of blood bags, blood and working with medical materials was a very dangerous job for the regime, specific people had this information. The way in which she was detained, either through close surveillance or through a whistleblower, the most likely cause of Faten's arrest, is telling.

When I came out of Branch 215, Faten was still there, and I met her in Adra Prison. She had suffered a great deal from the girls with her. We were imprisoned with a nest of snakes, and the sad thing is they were women like us.

### Dream interpretation

On one occasion, after the rumors spread about me being a witch, the jailer asked me to go out of the cell, so I went out, he told me he had no children and that he wanted me to make him a "spell." I thought he was mocking me, I knew nothing about these things. But he said "Will you really make me a spell? I distrusted you the minute I saw you, you are sly, how much blood is on your hands?" I explained to him that I have nothing to do with magic.

I used to pray and see in my dream events that would happen, I don't know how, and one time one of the girls ask me to do it, and I did, and I saw in my dreams that we were gathered in the same place, and I saw a girl wearing a white veil and I do not know her, she knocked on the door and I opened it, and the cell was clean and she gave me a thread, and she asked me to knot it and with every knot to read "God is one" and blow on it. I asked her "Why do I blow?" she answered me: "Do not ask, tell this dream to the girl named Hanan." When I woke up I told them I had a dream, and among them was Hanan, a Palestinian girl. They said "Let's try." And we started knotting a thread and on the same day, the jailer opened the door and told Hanan: "Come pack your stuff." From then on, they began to be kinder to me.

### Quran

At Branch 215 there were detainees from the 1980s, including prisoners from Lebanon and Syria from the Muslim Brotherhood. They were on the top floor and living a normal life. They had a TV and an oven, and sometimes they baked and had items we did not have, such as oil, onions and garlic. There was a man nicknamed the Sheikh, from Idlib. He asked the jailer that a Quran be given to Faten Rajab because she asked him. When they brought Faten and put her in the cell, she was close to the cell where the sheikh was. The latter knew about Faten. He and the old prisoners raised azan (call for prayer) and prayed, and the jailer stayed up with them at night. In this branch, we did not hear the sounds of torture because we were in rooms above the ground. Below was where the detainees and interrogations were held.



## Investigations and bargaining on charges

I was interrogated three times in this branch, and they were taking me to another building for interrogation. The interrogator told me that he was not convinced of all the previous investigations with me, and that he would repeat the investigation, but he eventually started bargaining and asked me, "Do you want me to put you as working in coordination or with weapons?" They didn't have any tangible evidence against me like a mobile phone. I didn't confess. In one of the interrogations there were four interrogators and one of them said, "This whore is not going to speak." Someone said, "You can't speak that way." He replied: "Can't you see she is messing around and not talking" and the other said "It's not your concern," and directly attacked him and began to fight, then they threw chairs and hit each other with them, and their shouts were getting louder. I was afraid of how this would reflect on me, and went out of the room and tried to escape, one investigator grabbed me and put me in another room and asked me to turn my face to the wall and not move. The interrogators were alerted and tried to stop their fight and calm them, and then one of them covered my eyes with something similar to wire and returned me to the room. The girls began to ask me what happened and thought I was crying because they beat me, and the jailer came at night and told the girls what happened and said: "Damn her, that witch, they almost killed each other. What spell did you cast on them?" Faten said jokingly: "I told you" but everyone was afraid of me, including the girls, and they stopped talking to me.

Two or three days later, an old green phone rang, and when it rings, it means that there is an investigation or release. The jailer came and took me to the interrogation and put me in a room where they were torturing young men. There was a person with a beard, black clothes, and a rosary. He was torturing a huge young man wearing only his underwear, all over him was his blood, his feet swollen, his body lacerated, his eyes swollen, and his mouth swollen. He beat him with a black cable, a rubber belt from an old washing machine, beating with it flays the skin. He said to me "If you don't confess I will take your clothes off you and I will beat you together." Then they brought another young man for interrogation, and the interrogator asks, "How did you have sex with your aunts? Did your aunt ask you to have sex in her anus or her vagina?" The young man was blushing and silent, I was very disturbed by the situation that took place in front of me, and I think that if I was not present, the young man would answer yes to end his torment. Then he forced him to the ground and said to him: "When I am standing you go down to my boots, kiss my boots so I will let you go." The poor man began to kiss his boots, and then he said to him: "No, shine them with your tongue" and the young man hesitated. He stepped on his back dozens of times. The young man started whining continuously and started begging him to leave him, but he did not leave him.

Then an agent came and took me, and said to me, "Why are you like this, while your family are sensible?" I said, "How do you know my family?" I didn't know he was an interrogator. He said "We asked about you and your family, and if they were involved too they would be tortured." I was afraid they would go after my family. And he took me to the same room where the interrogators had a fight, and there were two other people, and he said to me, "Don't think we will argue with each other for someone like you. You are just a mosquito, you have no value" He began to tell me "Come on, confess. I want phone numbers. If you don't give me the gunmen's numbers, I'll rip

your file and start over" I gave him my old and expired number from four years ago, and I began to give him figures from my imagination, all wrong information, and I said to him: "I loved someone," and he stopped here and told me: "Come on tell me how you had sex with this person?" I said, "No, nothing happened between us," but he told me, "Lies, come on. Tell me how you like him to have sex with you? From the front or the back?" He said "Lies, did you suck his organ or did he ask you?" I replied, "What's this shit? I do not allow you to talk to me this way," He replied: "You are whores, prostitutes, opening a brothel in the Hajar al-Aswad." I said "a brothel! Go and ask about me! I will not allow you to say this about me," and I continued to silence him, and in fact when I told him that I love someone I had intended to confuse him, to protect my family and keep them away from any suspicions in the future, because they can simply bring and arrest the families of detainees. He was ridiculous and wanted to bargain on what to charge me with, to understand why I was in the region, and he also wants to throw weapons in my case, and I said, "Who am I to give me weapons!" He replied: "No, you are one of them and you have influence." I interrupted, saying, "I am worth a bullet to you and to them. I have no value anywhere. You have left no value to humans and we are logs to you." He said "You lured soldiers from the barriers" I said to him, "I did not come down to the barriers," and I continued to talk because I felt that his temper was calm. In the prison we learned to distinguish between an investigator who was angry and one who is able to hear us, and it was clear to me that he could hear me, and I continued: "I became involved and loved this person and I have nothing to do with anything" and he said: "So I will put your accusation down as sexual exploitation," I said, "I have not heard of this charge before!" He replied, "You exploited the gunmen." I said "I exploited them or they exploited me?" He said "You exploited gunmen" and put down the accusations I was charged with in Branch 227: working and participating in coordination units, working with armed fighters, confirmed receipt of money transfers in my name. I left Branch 215 in February 2013.

### **Adra Prison**

I took my things on the basis that I would go home, they put me in a car with young men who had been tortured and took us to the military police. I was presented to a military judge and he asked me the same questions, and I told him my confessions, I told him: "What is reported is not true, I confessed under torture." I said that based on what the interrogator at Branch 227 told me, and I tried to call my family on the advice of the girls, but I didn't have the money for someone to let me call. I stayed about three hours in the military police, then we went up to the car again, and they told me they would put me in deposit at Barzeh police station, and the agent asked me, "is there someone else in your file?" I said no, but he insisted, and began to insult me out of everyone present, and all the time he was making fun of me and telling me: "coordination units."

Then we arrived at Barzeh police station and the agent came to inspect me. I told him "I will not let you inspect me, I came from a branch and I don't have anything and I will not let anyone touch me." He was angry and I repeated what I said and added "I have no weapon or blade, look at me I'm infected with lice" and he left me alone.

They put me in a big cell where there were three women from Deir ez-Zur. The situation was relatively comfortable. There was a mattress but it was very dirty, there was a sink and bathroom but no water. The agent came and said "who wants food? Give me money and I will buy you food." I was upset because I had no money, but the girls asked for food, and the agent brought beans, falafel, soft bread and tea and they paid him, and I felt that a whole lifetime had passed me by, "I'm eating beans, fresh bread and falafel? From where? From Barzeh!" I was overjoyed, and I felt as if life had returned to me.

On the second day they took the three women and I stayed, and the agent told me: "You are going to the Terror Court." My knees gave way I was so terrified, and I thought I would be executed. I didn't know anything about the Terror Court. On the same day they brought three girls from Daraa, and in the evening, they brought girls from the Air Force Branch and we were twelve girls.

All night we told our stories to each other, and how we would go home. Still I was not reassured. In the morning, every patrol took three or four daughters to different destinations, and I went back with the same car that brought me, and all the way the agent cursed us and insulted us, and we saw Damascus and we saw people living their normal lives, and we were tortured and no one felt it. I watched the university students as they left the university.

They took us to the Court, and we waited there for a long time. The criminal defendants were not verbally abused, they were smoking and moving around, and we knew that they were criminal defendants of different charges, theft, abuse, and facilitating prostitution, and I did not know what it means to facilitate prostitution, but later I understood.

As for us, we were forbidden to move, talk and question, and it was forbidden for anyone to approach us, even the policemen were cursing us. After routine procedures they took us in the afternoon to the Terror Court in Mazzeh, and told us we would be taken to Adra. They filed the papers and we returned to the Court and afterwards we boarded a big van with police officers inside.

The police officers and the criminally accused girls knew each other, and they put on Saria al-Sawas songs and started clapping. Before we got to the prison, they turned off the songs, and one of the officers told us, "Everyone duck their head." They cocked their rifles. The road to the prison was dangerous. They told us "Many people were killed on this road, and detainees were also killed."

We arrived in Adra Prison in mid-February 2013. We were received by prison guards who threw our things on the ground and told us to retrieve them. The jailer Abu Timur from as-Suwayda started shouting at us. One of the girls was laughing, a seventeen-year-old girl from Daraa. He cursed her. They put us in the fifth wing - deposit, I entered with three girls from Daraa and in the room were about twenty-seven girls. Here we began to suffer, we were very tired and hungry, and in Adra prison food and drink is allowed within a certain schedule. In this prison the girls write what they want and pay money and someone gets what they requested. After months I saw vegetables, tomatoes, cucumbers, parsley, lettuce, green onions, and smelled food. I was broken and hungry. Although there beds and blankets, no one gave us a blanket and we didn't have a bed. We were shivering from the cold because the weather was cold, and every

four girls were sitting around a heater and under a blanket. We were sitting on the ground, although we were all detainees the same as everyone else, and none of them invited us to food or gave us anything, except one called Khawla from Deir ez-Zur. She gave us a blanket, which is a military blanket, a piece of blanket. We sat on it. Nobody offered us a bite of food or piece of bread and we slept on the piece of blanket.

The next day I asked Khawla: "We don't have any blankets! We want blankets, I want to bathe and need shampoo." She asked me, "Do you have money?" I replied, "No, I have no money." One girl said "Here if you don't have money you are worth nothing."

Khawla and another girl brought us some shampoo, I think they have no one and they are used to girls and the prevailing atmosphere, we washed with hot water, of course there is no hot water, but the water is heated by a power strip. They heated water and brought it to us. I took a shower after more than forty days during which I had remained without a bath, and after the bath they told us to throw away our clothes, so I told them that I have no other clothes, and none of those present would give us clothes. We used our shoes to put under our heads instead of a pillow.

The next day the situation changed a little, and we started to sleep on three blankets, we did not have a pillow. After that began the breaking of "souls;" we did not have a male jailer but a female jailer, and each group would gather around people from their region, for example those from Damascus were four or five girls, the same from Homs, and every new person in the prison was ostracized, whether because she had no money or she had lice. Gradually, I became used to the situation, I didn't talk to anyone. After two or three days I asked for a mattress, they brought me a thin one but it was better than a blanket. The food was fine but very little. Although many girls had visits and cooked, they still took their share of the food that was distributed to us, we said "You cook and have food, leave us your share" and they replied "it's our share and our right." And their food would stay there until it was rotten and still they wouldn't give us any. It was simply control and power.

### **Drawing borders**

One of the women who was with us, Wissal, who is from Hama, was talkative, dirty, and very impolite. She acted like our boss. One time, after I had enough of her, she was distributing the food, so she gave us less and gave the girls who had visits more. I grabbed the rice bowl and stomped on it with my feet. I said "Listen, we starved and nobody could humiliate us, do you think you can humiliate us for a bite of rice, which is not even yours?" I stomped on the rice and started screaming and beating everyone and I could no longer see anyone. The girls started to calm me down, but with that I put an end to anyone taking my share, and after what happened they started turning to me, and trying to calm me down, and I told them: "nobody come near me or I will kill her. Call the police, take me back to the branch, I don't care anymore, we are starving and all this over a bit of rice" stomped over all the food, everything, everyone was silent, and all the girls who had no visits supported me and told me "You did what we wanted to do." I told them "I don't want charity from anyone and my food is enough for me." In fact, I didn't care about food because I wanted to know what my fate would be. This is my story in this prison.

There was a group of girls who had been with me in the branches, nice girls who were collecting some money and bringing new girls personal items like sanitary napkins, soap and shampoo, but they didn't bring me anything because they thought I had money, and I didn't ask them for anything and didn't complain. When I wanted shampoo, I would ask a girl I knew, and it was not necessary to bathe daily, but once a week, especially after I was rid of lice, and at that time we were forbidden to make phone calls.

### **The Strike**

We started a mass strike after Mother's Day in March 2013. It was one of the most successful strikes in the history of women's prisons in Syria. It had a huge impact, even the agents were surprised. It started after the women detained became frustrated they were not being released and not brought before court for more than a month. On Revolution Day we all agreed on the importance of conducting disobedience and a mass strike. Mother's Day came and the soldiers started broadcasting pro-regime songs, speeches and interviews with Bashar al-Assad in order to incite and provoke the detained mothers. At night they got drunk and mocked us in front of the door in the absence of cameras, and they were forbidden to enter our dormitories. Mai began planning for the disobedience, a detainee who had been tortured a lot and had swallowed metal pieces in Branch 227 and who is currently in Germany, with (H. K) and Nayfa Khaddour and others from Homs, Deir ez-Zur and all Syrian provinces.

After Mother's Day, the strike started by us going out to the courtyards. We chanted loudly for freedom and sang revolutionary songs. We cursed the Shabiha and security. No police officers spoke to us, we were not afraid, and we prepared ourselves and put on thick clothes in case we were beaten. Then we began a silent protest and refused to go into our cells and stayed in the corridors and locked the doors and remained silent. However, one girl, God forgive her was the reason for the chaos. She cried "Come on girls, 'Takbeer' [God is great]" and no sooner had she said it than everyone started cursing and chanting "Syria is ours not Assad's", and we started writing on the walls "Syria is ours not Assad's" and "Syria for all, it is not a farm belonging to the Assad family." I still remember what we did and laugh, yes we wrote on the walls, we were one voice and we were not afraid of anything. Not one of us was afraid for her life. After Mother's Day, the mothers' hearts were broken for their children, they had not seen their children for several months. At this point, the Shabiha and the policemen entered, one carrying a thin car tire, and another carrying a baton, and another carrying a pistol, the rest were holding sticks and metal pieces, and they started beating us but we remained sitting on the ground, there was no place to hide, and the screams began.

Afterwards, the beatings gradually eased, they opened the doors, took us in and investigated each one separately, and they asked who chanted, who sang, who wrote, etc., and wrote a report about each of us, and accused us of insulting the state because we cursed "Mr. President." The atmosphere became calm and they took several girls who wrote on the walls to solitary for a few hours and then they were returned to the dormitories, and we agreed that if any of us stayed in solitary for several days or they beat any one of us, we would escalate the disobedience and not be afraid of anything.

Then they brought us food and we all refused to eat, except one who said, "I am hungry and I want to eat." We told the agent: "We all refuse to eat except this girl." We refused to let the food in and did not eat. We were in three dormitories, each with twenty-four to twenty-six women, all of whom took part in the strike.

The next day the Damascus police chief and the brigadier colonel and the lieutenants came and opened the doors. They asked us to calm down and asked us in a soft tone: "What are your demands?" "We do not want anything, we just want to go out to our children or bring our children here, and we do not want anything." We also asked that they allow us to make calls. They said "you in particular cannot make any calls and we do not have permission to allow it, but if someone comes to visit you are allowed to give the visitor your number or your friend's number to communicate." That was previously forbidden, but after our strike they allowed us to do so. After three days, seven or eight girls were transferred to the Terror Court, they were presented to the judge and they were released. This continued daily, women were sent to the Terror Court, some of them were released, some of them returned to prison, and the situation continued as such.

We are used to this life, we had schedules for food, went out to the courtyard to breathe, inside the prison there was a whole life and community, as is the case outside prison, and talents began to emerge, the teacher taught and the religious taught the Quran, and women benefited making handicrafts, but I did not like making handicrafts and felt it was a bad omen for me.

We organized ourselves and formed a small group, through which we were collecting money for girls with no money, and sometimes married women came to prison and their menstrual cycle would be interrupted, so we asked the nurse to bring a pregnancy tests or medicines, just like we were doing outside the prison. We drank coffee in the morning, and I became an active person inside the prison, and we got some value and influence after the strike.

## Visitations

One day, a detainee named Khawla came and woke me up from my sleep and said that I had a visit. I did not believe her at first. I told her, "Don't make fun of me." I went out to the visit and saw a woman behind the wire net. She cried and gestured to me, I asked her: "Who are you?" I looked carefully and said to myself, "I know these people!" It was my sister and my cousin's wife. They were crying and I tried to reassure them and said "Don't cry I'm well." My sister was dizzy and I understood that my brothers found one of the coordinators had posted a picture of a woman who was killed by a sniper and her clothes resembled the clothes I was wearing when I disappeared. But my sister assured them that my clothes were different.

I also asked one of the girls, who was detained with epilepsy in Branch 227, to tell my family that I was alive and to reassure them about me, because she lived near my sister's house, and when she went out she told her parents and her father visited my brothers. I had asked her to tell them to get out of the area they were living in if they could. My father was in my brother's house when the news arrived, and he came back to life after he had been in a critical psychological situation because of me, I later

learned that he was crying and saying: "My daughter is honorable," and he was afraid for me because I am a girl, and he was always wondering what was happening with me inside prison. Was I eating? Had anyone touched me? Had anyone assaulted me?

My poor father was elderly and affectionate, and the impact of my arrest on him was great. He came to visit me many times in Adra and brought my money, clothes, some food I like, he got me a toothbrush and toothpaste. He was crying like a child on every visit, and my tears were suffocating and I could not cry in front of him so that he would not be weakened, and I would say to him: "Do not be sad and raise your head and be proud of me, because I did not do anything wrong." I joked with him and said "You can take a break from my problems, and not hear any more gossip about me, some day you will hear good news of what I did, and do not be afraid, and do not come to visit me because you are tired."

My father asked for a lawyer because I stayed a long time in prison without trial and was delayed for more than eight months. The lawyer asked for a lot of money, first payment 100,000 SP, and my family were displaced and had no money and no work. My brothers refused to help me because they did not like my work with the revolution, and nobody stood by me but my father, who had saved 500,000 SP. He paid the lawyer the first payment of 100,000 SP. When he returned from seeing the lawyer he told my brothers he had a headache and went in to sleep, but my brothers noticed that his voice began to change, and his face was blue and his mouth was lopsided, so they took him in an ambulance to hospital. He suffered a stroke that led to damage in his brain, and he now urinates in the bathroom cabinet, believing it is the bathroom. In his youth my father was a military volunteer in Baba Amr, and now he sometimes tells my brothers that he is going to Baba Amr.

My father had bought a taxi from his financial compensation when he was discharged from the army after his illness, and he started working with it, because he did not have another profession, and after a period he bought another car, then bought a farm and his affairs became stable and improved, but after the death of my mother he became lonely and did not want to get married again.

After my father suffered a stroke, my brothers stopped visiting, which caused me to fear for my father, because on my last visit he cried a lot, and he asked me, "How can you eat this food? Dogs couldn't eat it." He saw himself the kind of food they gave us and the bowls for soup and rice and I answered him "It doesn't matter about the food, father! The humiliation they are showing us cannot be tolerated by donkeys, but what can we do?" He was crying and saying to me, "are they humiliating you, are they beating you?" I replied: "No, who dares!" What could I say to him! I couldn't say we were beaten morning and evening. I was afraid for him and said "It's prohibited to beat us because we are women." He cried bitterly and hit his head with his hands saying "Why are these women here? Look at their children crying for their mothers," as I tried to calm him down. He complained about my brother who would not go out to bring bread. He said "Look at your sister, you rascal, she's in here with the Shabiha and you don't dare go out and let me go to bring back bread."

When my father got tired, they took him to Saudi Arabia, to stay with my brothers who are there, but his illness developed and he is now in Istanbul and does not recognize any of us and urinates on himself, the situation is too much to bear. We left our homes, lost our house and car, the family is scattered and each one of us is in a different place,

problems have increased and people have been displaced, four or five families live in one room, and no one can tolerate anyone anymore. There is no money and no work. People are exhausted and my father could not take what was happening after he had lived a successful life, after he had been respected in the family and everyone gathered around him.

My sister used to come to visit me in prison, her husband forbade her and told her, "I don't allow you to visit her," but she refused and visited me twice a month, and my father came once a month.

### **Terror Court**

I stayed in Adra prison from the end of February 2013 until November 27, 2014. The lawyer worked on the swap file because my name was on the file.

The lawyer told me that I cannot ask for a release because of my transfer to the Criminal Court, and the judge issued an arrest warrant against me. I was first presented before the judge in June 2013. They dressed me in a blue overall and put my hands in cuffs and brought me to the judge. He asked me the same questions in the file and said to me, "Do you know (H.M)?" I said "No" and he asked me: "Where do you live?" I replied: "In Tadamon." He said: "How do you even know Tadamon?" I said "I know." The judge looked at me and said "I don't know why I feel like you did something!" I said "I did something like what?" He said, "You are condemned." He closed the file and said to the person sitting next to him: "Son, write detention." The judge had me detained. I immediately told him: "Please, I want to go to my family, I want to study, I want to live my life, I want to love I want to get married," and I began to scream and say: "I want to live my life," and one of the staff said: "Get out, get out, do not shout." I replied: "What more can he do!" He replied: "Be calm, it is possible he will transfer you to felonies." I did not know what felonies was, and later my brothers told me the lawyer said that felonies sentences range from six to fifteen years, and he would work to reduce my sentence to half the time, but he told my brothers: "It is better to work on the swap file because she will remain in prison for six years." The name of the lawyer was E.A., a former intelligence officer, who retired and became a lawyer. He worked on the swap file, but when he received a higher amount of money he put the name of that person first; that is, priority is for those who pay a higher price, and yet the lawyer could not do much, and he himself always said: "Hanadi's file is out of my hands, a swap file. Neither the judge nor I can release her. The decision is made by the branch investigating her."

I attended about nine sessions in the fourth wing where we were detained in Adra Prison, before that I was in the fifth wing and I was later transferred to the fourth wing. The judge would delay me every time. From one session to the next about four or five months would pass, sometimes three months, depending on his mood. Every time I came to the investigation I cursed in front of everyone and said: "Shit on you and the court, you really believe yourselves, you are ridiculous! Either kill us or stop bringing us to court, the court keeps delaying, what court is this, this is ridiculous." But no one would respond. During that time I learned to smoke.

The Terror Court is a large brokerage between judges and lawyers, a regular brokerage, and in the last period they were negotiating with the lawyers about money for a



release, some people could not pay millions for the release, while the police in Adra prison were different from the security branches and terrorism court. To the police you can pay 1,000 SP and buy the whole dignity of the police.

### **Adra Prison - Detention Section**

They took me from the Depository Section to the Detention Section in June 2013, where it is said no one leaves but rarely and where there are few people. In each room there are seven or eight girls, rarely do any of them leave, and only in a swap. Their charges are significant, and they are important to the regime for swaps, I felt that most of them were from the revolution. In Adra prison there are around six wings, the women detained in wings 4 and 5 were the Terror Court's.

I began to adapt to this wing, and it was less stressful for me than the fifth wing, perhaps because I got more used to the situation, and I saw many girls leaving through swaps, and the treatment of the agents towards us was different and less cruel than the fifth wing and I felt they looked at us with respect.

On one occasion, there were strong clashes with the Ghouta group. The regime fired shells and rocket launchers from the perimeter of the prison, about nine rockets. In return, the bullets fired sometimes reached our room, there were constant clashes and we became used to the sounds of shelling. But that day the fighting was stronger and they turned off the electricity and the agents came to us and told us to put on our clothes and keep silent, and closed the doors, and told us not to look from the windows, and stressed that any of us trying to get out would be killed, and if they hear us say "Takbeer" it would be our last day alive. We knew that there was something happening outside, they were mobilized. Then the electricity came back on, and the shelling intensified and we heard the sound of tank chains, and the sound of "Takbeer" from outside the prison, and we expected that we will die that day, the regime would never release us, and it was also impossible for someone to come and free us. We lost hope. Some of the women started praying to God, but I prepared myself because I hoped we would be released from prison.

An hour later they took us to the basement, and the shelling intensified and a number of agents were injured, and some died. At dawn the situation calmed down and they took us back to our rooms and started questioning us. They brought the women who had chanted, the ones who prayed were accused for praying against them, they punished all the girls and hit them on their feet. Some were taken to the Political Security Branch and tortured, returned a week later to Adra prison, because they had said called the killed agents dead dogs. There were girls who asked to go out to help the injured agents and one of them stole someone's mobile phone and brought it to the wing. The place was in uproar, they imposed sanctions on us and closed the doors and deprived us of visits and gatherings, and they beat us and deprived us of many things such as pens and papers.

One time they were beating a girl and I said to the agent: "I will not let you to beat her, beat us all and do not take one of us to beat." He replied, "Come outside then" I thought all the girls would defend me, but they were all afraid and withdrew, I went out and said to him: "I do not fear you," and he began to beat me and the girl, I ran and entered the dormitory, but he followed me and continued to beat me. I said to him:

"Enough injustice, what do you want from us! You imprison us and oppress us and want to hold us accountable for anything we say, we hate you and we will continue to hate you and wish you ill" and I provoked him saying "God is great, and God willing, more of you will die, and they will come in and trample upon you," and he continued to beat me until I started screaming "Help me, he is taking my clothes off" and he let me go immediately, but I continued: "You criticize Israel, by God the Israelis are more honorable than you and don't treat prisoners like this." He left me alone and told me: "Your punishment will come, you're waiting for your shit army to come for you," and the punishments and harassment towards us began. We couldn't say a word, and some girls started working against us and writing reports about us, and we were summoned to the court based on a letter from the prison patrol. They deprived us of many things and continued to harass us more, and visits started to be monitored.

The situation continued until the old brigadier changed and they brought in his place a new colonel. He was leery and despicable. He was in charge of Gharaz prison in Daraa, but after liberating Daraa they transferred him to Adra prison. He had corruption files against him and I later heard from the girls that they dismissed him from his work. He used the girls by facilitating their affairs in exchange for telling on us, so sometimes they would tell him that we are smuggling information and data out of the prison in order for the armed fighters to come and get us out.

The number of women increased and there were now fifty women in each wing, and whole families came to prison. We found mothers and daughters. Lice began to spread and there was chaos and people started stealing, a policeman would come in and beat any girl he wanted to beat, and the situation became very bad. It was different from when we first arrived, when there was some respect for us.

I kept going to be interrogated in court until there were reconciliation initiatives. The prison was visited by Arab and foreign delegates and we started to tell them that we had been tortured and the regime is holding us hostage, but they told us "We can't listen to you or be alone with any prisoner, according to protocol, we are only here to monitor hygiene and health." We said to them: "There is no cleanliness, no medicines, and little food and there are cases of scabies." They didn't listen. They had a certain purpose. There were foreigners in Adra prison, one Iraqi and one Spanish. Their husbands were ISIS fighters. They released them through their embassies out of the country. We don't know which committee visited us but when they came the Head of Police in Damascus was with them. We asked them to let us use the phone like the other dormitory. They told us in this section phone lines cannot be installed, and we had to use the line in the other section. The first time I held a phone in my hand and called my family was in 2014, after more than two years. Even then, while I was talking there was an officer standing beside me, and we were forbidden to talk more than two minutes and then she would cut the line. Some mothers kissed her feet in order to talk longer, but she refused, we offered her money and she refused. She said "You leak information." Even the other prisoners treated us badly, they were afraid of us, it was very hurtful. So many women collapsed after hearing their children voices.

The number of women was increasing and there were many problems, many girls were taken to the branches again. The first girl, Walaa al-Aqel from Ghouta, was sentenced for fifteen years, I was with her in the same patrol and she was sentenced in front of me, which caused us to collapse. There were arbitrary sentences instead of detention,

life started to get worse, they started transferring us from our wing and to be with the criminal prisoners, but I was not moved from the fourth wing. The treatment by criminal prisoners was bad, they treated girls like slaves and animals, if one of the girls caused a problem or expressed an opinion, and they would beat her. Everyone had to be supportive of the president. They were there on criminal charges: murder, theft and prostitution. I remember one of them who had been sentenced to death because she did not appeal the sentence and did not hire a lawyer, and the sentence was carried out against her, her crime was murdering her husband's daughter. They arrested women who are mentally ill and brought them to Adra prison, one of them was in the Palestine Branch before she came to prison, she was mad and would not let us sleep night or day.

I remember a detainee who was from the Bedouin of Homs, very simple, and when she heard the news of her son's martyrdom under torture, her mind could not bear it, and when I woke up the next morning, she had lost her mind and had grabbed a stick and began to behave like she was herding sheep and picking out weed. I came across another detainee who lost her memory in prison. Another woman, Amal, says she has papers from the mental health institution in Homs. She was on a treatment schedule and if she wasn't treated her condition would worsen. She wanted to be treated for her daughter's sake, who had been divorced by her husband when her mother became ill. There are pregnant women who gave birth in prison, there was a birth where the baby needed an artificial incubator, and because it was not provided the baby died, her mother did not know where they buried her even though she asked them, they did not tell her because her husband was detained, and her family were in Latakia and could not reach her.

There were a lot of pregnant women, and they were telling us, "The Free Army gets us pregnant and we give birth." One time, one of the pregnant women was walking in the corridor, she was allowed to do so because she was pregnant and it was time for her to give birth, and suddenly she screamed and the baby came out, and they took her to the medical department.

There was also a woman named Fatima Ago, from Afrin, her husband was from Ghouta, she gave birth in prison and named after her son Fahd. He is six years old now and I read today on Facebook that they are looking for her family, because when she came out of prison six years later she could not find her family due to the displacement. I also remember a woman who was arrested when she was pregnant in Latakia Prison, she gave birth there then she was transferred to Homs prison, then Adra and she is still there, her son is now eight.

### **Ambushing my sister**

During that period they arrested my sister and her sister-in-law in an ambush, they took them to the Palestine Branch and tortured them. They arrested her because of a phone call she received from inside the liberated areas, any contact that was made from inside those areas to a person residing outside means they were arrested immediately, because all phones inside those areas were monitored. After the call, they monitored my sister's phone. The person who called her took advantage of my arrest, he said that he wanted to hand her over to the regime because her sister, me, was detained and all

her family were of the opposition. The exchange initiatives had begun, he had nothing so he tried to trick my sister and hand her over to the regime in return for his safe passage from the liberated areas, "like a deal, I hand over a person to you out there and you let me out, a reconciliation." Many civilians were exhausted by the siege in Tadamon, al-Hajar al-Aswad and al-Kadam, so he took advantage of the situation. During this time, I was waiting for her visit to me in Adra Prison, and at eleven o'clock on November 27, 2014, the jailer called me and said: "I have good news for you, get your things, your release has arrived." I couldn't believe it, I wasn't expecting the news and I fainted when I heard it. The girls asked what had happened and I told them I thought it was a lie. They were so happy, they gave me a farewell party and cheered for me and the girls came from the other wings and bid me farewell.

### **Release through reconciliation**

I said goodbye to Adra prison and went out. I did not know where I was going, until I learned that I was released in a reconciliation deal known as "national reconciliation." A patrol took us to the security square, and told us to sign a pledge not to participate in terrorist acts, and to hand over any terrorists. I met a brigadier or colonel who came from the Palestine Branch, and was a representative of the Minister of Reconciliation Ali Haydar. He told us we would go home and told us to go to Palestine Branch for review on a specific date, and told me "There is a surprise for you, go to the yard." I went and found there my sister and her sister-in-law and four other women, we hugged each other, they were the happiest moments of my life, and I was happier about my sister's release than my own because she is a widow. We went to the governorate building, and there Brigadier General Ali told me: "This is the last time in your life I see you here," he meant clearly "Get out of this country."

We went to my uncle's house and found no one there except my nephews who were very happy for their mother's release, as were the children of her sister-in-law. My uncle's family couldn't believe I had been released. My family had all escaped to Turkey and no one was left. Everyone was shocked I was out and they were all crying, they called my family in Turkey and their joy was indescribable, even my brothers who do not like me rejoiced, and did not believe it until they saw me in a video call over the Internet.

### **I fled with my life**

I stayed in Damascus for two weeks, and before I traveled, I checked back in Palestine Branch twice, and they asked me to be their agent and said I had a leader's personality and my word had value. Of course, this was to influence me and make me feel important. How could my word have value when people were killing each other? And who am I not to kill me with a bullet? Especially ISIS and Nusra, people were besieged and eating cats, who was I to enter those areas and bring them information? Of course they told me in exchange for being their agent: "We will give you a mobile and a car and a salary." I forced myself to be calm and I told them: "Of course, but I want to rest for a while" They asked me to convince my family to return to Syria and go through reconciliation, but of course I don't trust any of them. I stayed for two weeks and could no longer tolerate it because my nerves were frayed and I was afraid at every moment

of arrest; even the lawyer said to me: "There is no safety," I didn't have any release paper, I was released when I was still on trial, and my name was still circulated at checkpoints. The lawyer alerted me of the seriousness of the matter, and asked me to leave and not go through any checkpoint, because they would take me from branch to branch and I would enter a maze of branches, to the extent that my brother wanted to book me a plane ticket through Beirut airport, but I was banned from traveling.

To flee with my life, I convinced my sister that we had to travel, but I did not have enough money to travel, we had only five thousand SP, I did not even have clothes, we took a coach and did not tell the driver about my story. The passengers had food items so we were not searched. On the way I pretended to be asleep and we passed through forty-four checkpoints from Damascus to Idlib.

I arrived to Idlib on December 14, 2014 and I was shocked. "What is this? Where are we, in Chechnya or in Afghanistan?" It wasn't important who was there, the most important thing was it wasn't the regime. I was wearing trousers and a jacket and someone told me "That is not right, sister, think of Judgement Day sister?" I told him "If only you knew what has happened to me you wouldn't blame me, I was a detainee," and the driver heard me and was angry I hadn't told him and said "I would have hid you at least," I told him "We would both have been punished."

I stayed in Idlib for one night and stamped my passport at the crossing. I was in Istanbul on New Year's Eve. I arrived and I didn't have a single lira with me, my brother had booked bus tickets for me and my sister from Antakya to Istanbul.

### **New suffering**

I fell ill because of travel, fatigue and lack of sleep, and a new kind of suffering began. I started to look for work, sewing in workshops or cleaning dishes in restaurants. I was ill for over a month and nobody cared or tried to help me. I started spreading my name and my sister's name and saying that we had been detained, and I wrote about what is happening inside the regime's detention centers and I received no response. Unfortunately there was no interest in the detainees, even though that I posted valuable information, but nobody cared that we were detainees or that we needed treatment.

My life had stopped for three years, the period of detention, I had been studying and I knew no profession or craft to work, and did not know what to do. In Turkey life is difficult if you do not work, I slept hungry and cold. My sister and I rented a house, and could not secure our food. We were without a breadwinner. The Turks helped us when they knew we had newly arrived.

As for associations and organizations, they exploit the pain and suffering of people and we do not get anything from them. I tried to communicate with someone who was a member of an opposition organization, they told me she had been a detainee and helps former detainees, but unfortunately she took advantage of me for a story on social media. I wanted to meet her and tell her my story in order to help me with rent for the house for only one month, I did not want makeup or treatment, but a house to shelter me from the cold. Three or four days after reading my letter she replied and said that I could meet her in Taksim square, i.e. on the street, I didn't have the road fare and I didn't know the roads in Istanbul. I asked my cousin to take me by bus, and I took a

day off from work to see her. I was working in a sewing and embroidery workshop. When I arrived, she started procrastinating, I was talking to her on my cousin's phone via Facebook Messenger, because I don't have a cell phone. I asked her, "Where are you?" Two hours later she answered me, it was cold and raining and I was waiting for her in the street. She eventually said, "Please, there is someone who wants to meet you from BBC. Meet her and I don't know if she will be of use to you." I agreed and I told her "no problem." I was interviewed and the journalist was kind to me. That was a helpful gesture from the opposition member. Then I sent her another message and she did not answer, I was standing in the rain and the phone battery was almost dead, I could not meet her even though I stayed from morning until evening, and I returned home, and the next day the employer expelled me and said he didn't need me. I was not good at sewing so I was cleaning up paper and embroidery leftovers and making tea, coffee and cleaning the dishes that they used in the workshop. Until now, the same experiences keep recurring and people take advantage of us.

The rent of the house that my sister and I took was three hundred and fifty liras, the house was bad and tiny. Frankly, the Turks helped us more than anyone. When the neighbors knew we were new in the neighborhood and we had no mattresses, they brought us mattresses, blankets, carpets, cleaning materials, food, gas and other things.

### **Changes and challenges**

During my detention, my personality was very strong and everyone who was with me witnessed this, I confronted the agents and nothing scared me. The arrest was an honor for me, but it broke me, especially with my daughters.

The worst crisis started when I came to Gaziantep to look for work. I got married after I came to Gaziantep to someone I had been in contact with, and had two daughters. After that he abandoned me and I started to work and pay our way. I cleaned cafes, I looked for places where there are cafes and would work for twenty-five SP. There are organizations where we registered but they would say "you are married." I couldn't work anymore because my daughters were young and I couldn't leave them alone and go out to work. You needed to have connections with influence or have sexual relations with someone to get help.

I currently do not work, but there are paid courses that have kindergartens and I take my daughters with me. Sometimes I participate in producing programs but it is work I do at home. However, my life in Turkey is sub-zero. I live in the border areas, with a Turkish Red Crescent card and aid. Frankly, I am responsible for everything. I work outside the house and inside, I am the mother and the father and I face everything alone. Nobody helps us or asks about us, except for some of the girls and detainees.

My husband did not work, and did not support us, and did not ask about me, and we starved. Even when I wanted to tell him about my troubles, he did not hear me, and he made fun of me and said that I am getting older now and I have daughters. I stayed at home and gained weight, and no longer care what I looked like. I used to be seen as a cheerful young girl, and now my role is to care for my daughters if they cry or become sick.

I find that the role of the mother is harder than all the life I have been through, for me every time I leave the house is a struggle, for example I have to dress them in warm clothes, then where to go? And how do we get there? I suffer a lot, and I often think that I should put them in an orphanage and end this suffering. I tell myself it's unjust to have them suffer along with me in this tough life I have. My brothers also have troubles and concerns. I became used in prison to there being a big rift between me and people, I am not like them and they aren't like me, I do not feel any connection with them. I feel that detainees are only my friends, we understand each other and have a common language. For example, if I talk to my sister she will silence me and say: "Please stop, enough, were you the only one to be detained?" And if I say something to one of the neighbors, they will listen to me the first time talking about detention and be moved, and after that they will not want to hear about it. As for former detainees, they understand my pain and suffering.

After I left prison my brothers asked me, "Did they beat you?" I replied: "Yes, and tortured me a lot." My sister asked me "I want you to tell me truthfully, did anyone take your clothes off or rape you?" I replied no, but she didn't believe me and said: "They're saying every woman they detained was raped, is that true?" I said "Not necessarily, there are cases of rape and I do not deny it, but that did not happen with me," and I added: "We would be in there without our veil and they would come in [and see us] when they wanted."

I think the reason my brothers alienated me is this. They don't believe I was detained for three years and not raped. They accuse me of having changed. On the contrary, I feel I am still at square one, I am the same after detention as before, they changed after they got married and had children, a life, work and homes.

I no longer care what people say, nor about the opinion of society, I smoke in the street, and if someone disturbs me I scream and yell, and if someone harasses me I scream, and if I do not like a conversation I criticize whoever said it, I cannot compliment anyone, and no longer care about anything and act spontaneously, I don't care about anything because all of our sanctities have been violated, and I don't want anyone to "be a man" and pretend to have honor, in the end he and his honor can go to hell, we saw hell in there and they were out here cheering for Bashar and pledging their blood and souls to him.

In general, I no longer care about the opinion of society, and that women should stay at home and not go out at night and may not smoke, no, [*expletive*], I want to smoke and who are you to question me?! I became bolder, I can ask any question, I am not ashamed to ask any question, and if I have a right I demand it boldly.

### **Psychological support**

As for psychological support for detainees, the organizations have set up many programs in this regard, but they are all failed programs. I am interested in psychology, but those who trained us for an hour or two, they studied two books or graduated recently, and want to make us a case study? He asks me "How did detention affect you?" I reply "It didn't affect me, I was normal" None of us remains normal, our souls dead and new souls are in their place, we are new people in form and content, can't they ask more profound questions? The psychological programs were bad, the same

copy, and they asked all detainees the same questions. There were people arrested and not tortured, and others suffered a certain psychological trauma, and one of the detainees may have been tortured and the other was not slapped once, for example. I was electrocuted but not hung from the ceiling, others were hung, and there is a woman who was arrested with her husband whose psychological state will not be like the others. But they use one mold, while each case must have a different approach, for each case you should go to their homes and know their needs and circumstances and what improves their psychology and status? And what they need? If they give detainees a grant of two-hundred dollars, stipends of employees in these organizations in Turkey are more than five-thousand dollars, two-hundred dollars will not break the budget of these organizations!

The organizations come to document the testimonies of detainees and say: "We may not pay you money so as not to turn it into a trade" Don't they get a salary? From this salary, let them allocate an amount, the amount of tea and coffee, or provide us with the opportunity to work and integrate into society, and give us activities because we feel a vacuum. I cannot do anything, we did not neglect the revolution and we were imprisoned so people can demand freedom and restoration of land and many other issues, we were the pillars of the revolution. I mean, all those who came to Turkey and established organizations built them on our shoulders and the shoulders of the martyrs who died under torture, those who participate in the negotiating body know nothing about torture, no one communicates to the world what is happening in the prisons. There are only the personal efforts of former detainees.

### **My experience with civil society organizations**

Inside Syria, I only heard of one official organization, and we heard that there are free nursing courses, but in Turkey, organizations treat us with arrogance and disgust, they do not communicate with us. There are two organizations who documented our case and we no longer hear from them, there was no follow-up from them, no empowerment for women. I feel sorry for wasting the money spent on workshops where we have gained nothing and they did not provide us with a job. There is only one organization I was comfortable with, they gave me and the girls a chance in the empowerment courses. Although I have been in Turkey for five years, I did not know anything about what transitional justice means, or reparations and human rights, I didn't know my right to testify about crimes except through those sessions.

### **They cheer for the male detainees**

When a man comes out of prison, he is celebrated and cheered. I certainly rejoice when a young man comes out of prison, but when a woman comes out of a prison, she is prevented from telling her story, even by their husbands they are prevented from talking about it in their own homes. They consider the imprisonment of women a shame and a disadvantage, so rape is not dealt with, even if they have not been subjected to it. I confirm that ninety-five percent were not raped and those who suffered are only about five per cent. I bet it is impossible for someone to say: "I was raped" Unless she has the means to tell her story, and her personality is already strong,



her family supports her, and her community supports her, then she can talk. How can she live when there is a prison inside her? How can she live and raise her children!

### Final word

I used to say that criminals should be slaughtered like cows, but if I demanded this or did this, they will also seek revenge and kill, and the bloodshed will not end. The best solution for these things is accountability. For the rights of the people, every criminal should confess that he killed, he should be publicly named, witnessed by the victims and tried for all violations and crimes committed, before a fair and impartial judiciary, not a party to the opposition or the regime, neutral and fair like the symbol of the scales of justice, and this must be done in front of the people, so we can rest and sleep and recover our rights. Our rights will not be restored with money, or houses, or positions. Our rights will be restored when they are held accountable, starting at the top with Bashar and going down.

I have had a dream since I was inside prison, to tell my story and all the stories I saw inside, I promised God, I promised myself and I promised all the girls I met prison, I would tell their stories and what the regime did to us everywhere, I would tell what the traitors did to us, I will tell everything. My dream is to hold a microphone and shout and talk about everything I suffered, because now I am free and my freedom will not be complete if the jailers are not tried. Until that happens my life will be in danger, as will the life of any detainee who decides to talk about what they did to us.

What's done is done, there is nothing that will give me back my dignity or relieve my pain or give me back the years I lost, even if we return to Syria, what's done is done and the wound will not heal, and there are still people inside the prisons being tortured and dying and people are still being arrested. Rehabilitation starts with ending the arrests first.

Apologies to the detainees should have been made when we were inside, apologies are worthless if they come too late. Personally, I do not want anything for myself, but I want for my daughters a better life, they have no one but God, I want my daughters to study because I was deprived of education, I was deprived of my life, and I do not want the tragedy to be repeated with my daughters, I want my daughter to have the best education, health and everything.

I wanted to document my story because I have to tell it so that it is not a book that can be closed, if I don't tell my story, who will? Who will tell what happened? It is my mission, so what happened in the 1980s doesn't happen to us, we kept silent so the crimes happened again. If we are silent again, like sheep, and another son of another official or authority comes to rule us, and we return to the country as if nothing has happened and stay silent about the crimes committed, they will continue. We were subjected to the ugliest crime of the century, a war crime, and nothing can silence me because it is a cause. Many women made me promise to carry messages and stories from inside the prison. They told me "Do not be silent" I swore when I was in prison that I would not be silent, and my detention may have been prolonged as a result.

I pity the educated women and big names who move from country to country and speak for Syrian women, where are they? Why don't they look for us! It is not enough

for them to be in important places, with cameras taking their pictures, and writing their articles, they must search for the ones who suffered, to deliver our voices to the whole world, and that's how they rise. Why did they not ask about Rehab and how she died? Faten Rajab, too, is it enough to hold campaigns and carry pictures of the detainees! No, it is not enough, there is no communication between us, and if it exists, it is arrogant; they are the aristocracy and we are the toiling class, we have paid the price on all sides, and if there is no change, the opposition will return to the country in the future and what happened will be repeated.

The opposition is a few Baathist blocs scattered between countries, they had an aristocratic Baathist upbringing. I don't deny there are good women who worked and changed. I'm not talking about those, I'm talking about the ones who reached positions of power and are in international organizations. As for foreigners, they come to us from Europe to ask about us, why should they have to? We don't see our own countrymen, whereas there are lots of international organizations, like Amnesty International. They contacted me when I arrived in Turkey to listen to me and take my testimony and document it. They came to me in Urfa where I was staying. They could have stayed in Istanbul and asked me to come and given me bus fare, but they came to me, and I shame the opposition for not doing so.

## Zainab's Trill<sup>4\*</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> - Zainab, interview with the author via WhatsApp, on February 06, duration 3.50 hours.

\*Cover By: Sara Khayat



I am married and I have four daughters and a son. I am forty-nine years old. I live in Turkey now with my husband and two daughters and son, after we were displaced from Qaboun. One of my daughters lives in Damascus and another in Libya

I left school when I was young, and I didn't get a ninth grade certificate because I got married. Before the revolution I was only a housewife, and I did not need to work because my husband was well-off, but the situation in Turkey is different, and I work in a kitchen to prepare food items.

Before the revolution, my life was normal, and when the revolution took place in Egypt, we followed it on television, as if it were in our country. My family and I were very optimistic about it. I felt that Egypt was my country and I participated with them in the demonstrations. We prayed to God for a revolution in Syria so we could regain our dignity and our freedom, because our country is not ours.

During the revolution I participated in the first demonstration in Qaboun, although Qaboun was surrounded by air force intelligence, civilian and military police, the Republican Guard and special units; despite everything that surrounds our country and its difficult situation, I don't know how we went out to revolt!

### **Participation in the revolution**

After the demonstrations in Daraa, we were greatly affected by the incident of the Omari Mosque, a demonstration took place in Qaboun on Friday March 21, 2011 in support of the families and children of Daraa, during which there was a funeral for a girl from our area. My father, my six siblings, and my thirteen-year-old son, were with them, a young man called Abu Durgham climbed onto the roof of the cemetery gate, carrying his head-dress and waving his hand and saying: "God is great." The protests ended. No one was arrested, and the youth returned to their homes.

When my thirteen-year-old son returned, he told me: "Mother, we went out with a demonstration. We said 'freedom' like Egypt and Tunisia and we did not hide from the security. I went out with the demonstration and it was wonderful, you did not see me." He was very happy to go out in a demonstration. We had a great fear of the regime. We didn't even dare to talk to a young soldier, because he might destroy us afterwards, and those who dared to are dragged to the security branches and disappear.

Then a demonstration went in our area on Sunday evening from Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Mosque, known as the Great Mosque. The security were waiting for them as someone had told on them. As soon as the men started chanting "God is great" they attacked them and detained some and dispersed the protest. But they let them go after twenty days.

We didn't have any more protests for fifteen days because of the security presence. We went to Barzeh as a new area. Back then, they had not participated in the revolution. We started to participate in the demonstrations there. We also participated in the Duma sit-in at the end of April 2011, during which there was shooting.

After our sit-in in Duma, we insisted on the demonstrations coming out of our town Qaboun. A demonstration took place at the beginning of May and arrived at al-Khomassya Company, just before Abbassiyyin Square. There were no women

participating but we were scattered along the highway fearing for our men. When they arrived at the company, security forces attacked them and killed five young men. They were the first five martyrs from Qaboun.

The next day I went out with the women during the funeral and chanted. My sister and I went out, but my husband did not allow the girls to go out with us because he was afraid of them, one was in first year of science at university and the second was in tenth grade. From the funeral, I returned to my house and did not find them because they were participating in the demonstration, my brother brought them to the house and intervened on their behalf, and since then the participation of women in the demonstrations began.

I would go with my sister, daughters and a friend of mine are currently living in Libya. We participated in demonstrations wherever they went out, in Duma, Harasta, Baghdad Street, al-Midan, Barzeh, Kafar Sousah, Mazzeh, and I still remember when it snowed on us at the Mezze demonstration on February 18, 2012.

There was no demonstration or funeral I did not participate in, and I was known in the demonstrations because I know how to trill [*loud celebratory noise made by women*], and everyone loved my trill because my voice is strong, and throughout the chanting I would trill, and the sound could be heard at the head of the demonstration even if I was in the back, and I felt it was my duty to participate in the funeral to trill for the martyrs.

My son was also involved in the demonstrations, and they even asked him at school to write a pledge not to participate in the demonstrations. He was pursued by security several times, but he ran away from them, went into the house, took off his school uniform, and sat down. Although he was superior in his studies, I prevented him from going to school because of the many incidents of kidnappings by Shabiha who came from the Ash al-Warwar and Tishreen neighborhoods. They came into our town in vans, they would wait in front of schools and kidnap the students, then kill some of them and throw them in the center of town, or demand a ransom to release others.

At first we limited our activity to taking part in the demonstrations, then it spread to all peaceful activities. I used to go to the Hamidiyah market. I bought material and made revolutionary flags with it for the protests. I used to print on the bandanas that young men wore either "God is great" or "God is one." In the meantime, I met a young man in the market of Hamidiyah, we talked and I told him I was with the revolution. I told him I tried to print on the material but it did not work, he explained that I need a mold of silk. I asked him, "Can you make me one?" He said, "Yes, but you have to take it from the Hajar al-Aswad area." At the time, the area was at the height of its protests, and security deployment there was heavy, especially after security attacked the demonstrators and burned several cars. I agreed to get them from there, and I did not dare to inform my husband about the matter. I had to pass through the checkpoints of Baghdad Street and Abbassiyyin, and the size of the mold was half a meter by a quarter of a meter, the size of a panel, a frame of wood with silk inside.

When I came home, my husband phoned and asked me, "Where have you been?" I told him I was in Hajar Aswad, and I will not forget what he said to me: "Oh God! What made you go there?" He knew why I went, I did not hide anything, and any participation in the revolution was known to him, because the situation of the country

was bad, and if I was arrested, God forbid, he had to know where I was and at which barrier I had been detained or at which branch. We were participating in the revolution together as a family, with my son and my brothers; my mother once told my brothers, four of them later martyred in the war, "You take your sisters out with you and they have children, why do you take them?" They said to her, "They want to go, better we know than they participate without our knowledge. This is their personal freedom, and they want to express it."

We went out after noon prayers every Friday, and every evening we would pray then go out in a demonstration, along the whole of Qaboun to the municipality. The demonstrations did not stop until twelve young men were martyred. They tried to get to Abbassiyyin square but couldn't and the security attacked them and shot at them heavily. In addition to the twelve killed, about one hundred people were wounded.

The young men did not arm themselves until it was imposed on them during a battle known as the bus battle. It was on the highway, after security forces surrounded the house of a young man called Badr al-Hamwi who was organizing demonstrations and killed him. A spy who used to protest with us and pretend he was against the regime was the one who told on him, so nobody who had arms announced it publicly. We couldn't tell army from security because they were all wearing military uniforms and helmets, some in special unit uniforms, even when they broke into our homes we couldn't distinguish them.

We continued the peaceful movement for a long time until the battle of the 1<sup>st</sup> of Ramadan in 2012, in which my second brother was martyred after he was injured in Ghouta. He had left Qaboun and gone to Ghouta, saddened by the martyrdom of four of his friends who were among the twelve young men killed by security. All the demonstrators were unarmed, even baring their chests in front of security forces to show them they were unarmed, but the security forces shot at them, and sometimes beat them with stones, like [Israelis did to] the children of Palestine. After that, my brother refused to participate in demonstrations, because he lost hope in peaceful activism and he joined some young men in Ghouta who shot at checkpoints on Ein Tarma road.

After the martyrdom of the twelve young men, the demonstrations stopped in Qaboun, and we paid tribute to the martyrs. Attending was Montaha al-Atrash, daughter of the hero Sultan Basha al-Atrash, with a delegation of men and women, and she honored the women who had participated in the protests. Also attending were Razan Zaitouneh and Fadwa Souleimane, may she rest in peace, and Fares al-Helou. I was there with my sister and my friend, with whom I had gone to the demonstrations, and Atrash asked us, we were well-acquainted, to come onto the podium during the memorial, but women on a podium among men is a big issue in Qaboun, although my brothers and husband do not consider it a problem.

The women were present during the memorial behind the big tent where they couldn't be seen, but we were standing with the people. We were walking with my brothers, my husband and the rest of the men in a row, shoulder to shoulder during the demonstrations. After three days, security entered Qaboun after they had surrounded it during the memorial. They did not approach us even though we had demonstrated and planted olive trees with Fadwa Suleiman and we visited the families of martyrs and paid our condolences.

When the memorial ended on the third day, communications were interrupted and security entered Qaboun at 2:00 a.m. and broke into houses. The men were in their homes asleep and no one expected them to enter. The military intelligence arrested around five-hundred people, they took my brothers at 3.30 a.m. They prevented anyone from leaving their house. If anyone tried to put his head out of a window, security officers pointed a gun at him saying, "Get inside." There was a soldier in front of every building. Schools and bakeries were closed, shops, movement was completely paralyzed, and three days later they withdrew and left, and this was the first arrest campaign exercised against us.

Delegates from Qaboun began communicating with the Air Force Branch to release the men, but they had a condition before their release; that the demonstrations should stop. They started releasing some detainees, including my brothers who were released after twenty-five days, but they later released everyone. I still remember the moment of their arrest, when they covered their heads with their clothes and started beating them until they put them on the bus. They put every group of twenty men in one bus and took them to the Air Force Branch, they did not arrest the women during this campaign, I was the first woman arrested in Qaboun.

### **Arrest**

I was arrested on October 14, 2011 by the Air Force Branch. Security cars would roam the streets daily between lanes and alleys, and if they found two young men standing together they were arrested. After they prevented demonstrations in our area, we would leave from the school. The day before I was arrested, we met in the evening and prepared the banners and paint sprays and we agreed that we would head out of the school, and we distributed roles, including who will carry the banners and who will write on the walls.

The next day, I gathered all the equipment for the demonstration and put it in my bag. My daughter accompanied me. And the other one; Bushra was a student in the school that we would be demonstrating in front of. Ahmed Laila School. The school had sent me a complaint that my daughter Bushra was demonstrating inside the school and chanting on the desks, and I signed a pledge that she would not demonstrate anymore. Sometimes, on her way home from school, she and her friends started protesting, even if they were only five girls, chanting for freedom and "The people want to topple the regime." We went to the school and as soon as we started gathering and preparing to start the protest, the Air Force Intelligence cars arrived and surrounded the school. I collected all the banners from the students to protect them, I told them to go home because there would be no demonstration as long as security was there. One of my daughters went to see her friends inside the school, and I stayed with my other daughter. I told her, "The demonstration has failed, by God we will not go home without doing something." I took out the spray, and my daughter asked me what I wanted to write on the walls in the street. In the meantime, talk of dialogue with the regime was spreading, so I told her write: "Leave, donkey, there is no dialogue" and my daughter started writing from the beginning to the end of the wall, in clear and large letters.



The drawing teacher came out of the school, she is pro-regime, and as soon as she saw us writing on the wall, she made a phone call, and I told my daughter: "She is talking to security, we have to get out of here." I put the spray in my bag to use again later and we hadn't walked ten meters when a security car parked in front of me and someone told us to get in and opened the back door. I asked him, "Where?" He pointed to the back of the car, so I screamed and pulled my daughter, we ran about five hundred meters until we reached the street. The security was behind us in the cars, and the location of the school was near the municipality. There, we found a car with three young men in, and I asked them to drive me and my daughter into Qaboun, to hide in the orchards of one of our relatives, and we went with them in the car. One of these young men would later blow himself up in front of a statue of Salaheddine in Hamidiyah Souq. I asked the man driving the car to speed up because the security was chasing us, and after we drove a short distance, security came out in front of us and surrounded us. I got out of the car and holding my bag and my daughter, and one of them said to me: "Why do you do these things?" I replied, "Why are you following me?" He said to me, "Look, I photographed you!" He had photographed me writing on the wall. I said: "I was going to my daughters' school to give my daughter a medical report." Suddenly a young man sprung on them, a fifteen-year-old from al-Rahma family, and began to say to them: "What do you want from them, they are women?" They beat him and pushed him away and I took my daughter and escaped. That young man was later killed with a bullet injury by a sniper when he was writing on the walls.

After my daughter and I fled, I knocked on the door of a house to hide in, but the owners of the house were afraid and did not open for us, and we ran and entered a narrow street and were surrounded by two security cars from both sides and took us into a shop. I did not have my ID because I emptied my bag before I left my house and left only my phone and some money, even the gold I left with my neighbor and I told her to give it to my husband or my daughters, I felt that something might happen, however I went to the demonstration and was not afraid.

Inside the shop, I started telling the officer, "Take me and leave my daughter." But they said "no we want you both." Then two elders of Qaboun, one in the Baath Party and another who has connections with the regime, asked the security to leave us but they refused, they even offered them money, but they still refused.

We were held in the shop for about a quarter of an hour until support came to them. I think they were afraid that the people of Qaboun would attack them. While we were held in the shop, I asked my daughter to deny during her interrogation that she had participated in the demonstrations, to tell them that she was in school, and we came out of together when we were arrested. I was trying to have us agree on one story, so as not to say anything contradictory in the investigation and have it used against us.

They took us to Qaboun police station and we stayed there for half an hour and then they took us out, and the head of the police station told security officers when they came: "Why do you want to take them, leave them, they are women!"

When they took us out, an officer of huge build wearing a suit with a radio and security forces around him, was standing outside, black cars were parked. The section was cordoned off. One of them struck me on my face and kicked me. They took me and my daughter.

At the time, I did not know that they arrested the two young men who helped us when we got into the car with them, but the third man escaped, one of them died as I said earlier, and one of them is now with the regime at checkpoints.

### **Air Force Intelligence Branch**

They brought me to the air force intelligence branch with my daughter, took our items and my bag, which included paint cans, banners, mobile phones and money. Then a woman thoroughly searched my daughter and me, she untied my hair and put my hijab back on. We were arrested at 2 p.m. and the interrogation continued until 2 a.m. They took us from room to room. Every officer was recording a report alone, they slapped me and my daughter on our faces, kicked us with their feet. The first question I was asked was: "Why are you demonstrating? And what did the president do to you, what do you want to protest, you eat, drink and work? Why are you causing confusion in the country? "

When we were arrested, they put us in a room with the two young men that we went with in the car and helped us, and turned our faces to the wall. The officer, Bassam from Hama, hit the first man in the row so hard that my daughter felt it at the end of the row. We were beaten so hard that day I couldn't stand on my feet.

I was very afraid for my daughter, and I will not forget what I was met with when we entered the room, I was exhausted from running and interrogation and standing and beatings. My nerves were frayed. I heard a voice say "Take of Zainab and her daughter's hijabs" I said, "You arrested us for something else, why the veil? What is your business and my veil?!" I heard another voice saying to him: "No one touch the veil of Zainab and her daughter" And I knew it was an officer not a soldier because they abided by what he said and stayed away from me, and then they took us to the cell.

I was with my daughter throughout my two-month detention, even though they threatened me that we would be separated and they would say, "If we take your daughter to another room and you hear her voice, what will happen to you?" I would always tell them "Take what you want from me but don't take my daughter away from me."

My daughter and I stayed alone, no one visited us, we did not bathe, and I didn't even have underwear. I was upset because none of my family had come but I learned later that my husband and men from Qaboun had tried to visit and were not allowed and they wouldn't let them bring us anything. There was a bathroom, but it was dark and there was no light and the water was very cold. I was surprised because I heard from other prisoners that they were given shampoo and tea. But they Gave us nothing.

As for the food, my daughter during the first week was not able to eat, they cooked bulgur without cleaning it, bad bean stock and inedible bread.

I did not know how the days were passing, it was like dying slowly, we did not know night from day, there was no light, the place was always dark, it was scary and dark and cold, in addition to the humidity and filth, the air extractor was always working,

making it even colder. We weren't wearing winter clothes, even though it was October, and I had a coat on over a summer sweater and pants.

After a while we became used to prison life, my daughter and I spent the day talking in a low voice about what we did before our arrest, how security ran after us, and we planned what we wanted to do after we got out of prison, and we tried to guess how people in the town would look at us after our arrest.

They only gave us blankets after a few days although the weather was cold, and every day there was an investigation. We were on the third floor underground, and the room was so small, I couldn't even stretch my feet when I lay down. I slept with one arm over my daughter I was afraid to sleep and leave her and one of the security agents might come. When I heard their footsteps on the stairs, I knew there was an investigation. From the moment I entered until I left, I didn't see the sun.

There was a small table and a chair in the interrogation room. I have an awful phobia of them.

The investigation room had a small table and chair, next to a torture device. The officer would come with sticks and ropes and when I heard their footsteps I would shake and turn pale. Until now, when I see policemen in Turkey I am afraid and tremble and I try to avoid them, because it has become a phobia.

The daily interrogation did not stop until fifteen days later. During this time they addressed me, and one time the interrogator said to me: "Why are you demonstrating, women, when your men are conservative?" I denied going out in protests but he showed me a picture of me covered with a black niqab. During the demonstrations, we women asked to cover our faces so that we could not be photographed, I usually do not wear a niqab, but a regular scarf, but the interrogator knew me from my eyes. Whoever took the image had targeted me. The interrogator asked me, "Is this you or not?" I replied, "Yes." He said, "How do you say you didn't protest?!" I replied, "I did not protest. The women went out to see what was happening and to console the other families, and I went out like all the women who went out, my husband and I are busy with our affairs and we are not involved in anything."

I did not mention the word martyrdom in order not to provoke him, the interrogator did not believe my words or the justification, but I left prison without changing my statement.

Beating was with sticks and ropes, slapping with hands and kicking with legs. On one occasion, one of the agents, the person who wrote my statement during the interrogation, called Abu Abdo, he lives in Qaboun and knows my family, he said "Zainab we don't want the matter to escalate and people to say we take women, you know the status of women in Damascus, we want to wrap up the whole thing. We don't want it to spread to Damascus." When there were others present his tone was different and I was afraid to answer him in case he was trying to trick me. When I was arrested with my daughter, the demonstrations had not gone out in Damascus yet, except for two in Hariqa and Marjah, then they stopped, but later they came out again.

One person told my husband during my detention: "Someone can bring your wife and daughter out, but he wants a million and a half SP." My husband agreed to pay and they agreed to meet in Mazzeh, but he found out that they were swindlers.

When I was in the criminal security, an officer with the rank of colonel from the State Security, named R.A., from Latakia and lived in Qaboun, interrogated me kindly so as not to scare me, and he calmed my nerves and said: "I live in Qaboun. And I know that you do not participate and that your men are afraid for you." I told him "True, our men are afraid for us and we don't go out." He questioned us for two hours and didn't hit us, he was the only one who didn't hit us. But one time they brought three young men from Midan, and they started beating them in front of us, and my daughter paled and almost fell to the ground, and then they told the agents to take us back to the cell.

I stayed in the Air Force Branch for two months and then I was transferred to the Criminal Security - Bab Moussalla Branch, and there were women inside the cells.

### **Criminal Security**

We stayed a month in the criminal security, and the area of the cell where they put me and my daughter was 1.30\*3 meters. During this period criminal security questioned us, as well as agents from Political Security and State Security. The one from State Security was called R.A., I saw him in Qaboun once after I left prison, when we wanted to go out for a demonstration and they asked my sister and I to find out if there was any security at the Sheikh Jaber Mosque. We found security and the army in the area of the Great Mosque nearby, and R.A. was with them. He tried to talk to me but I walked away and changed my way. I feared that people in Qaboun would see him talking to me, what would they say about me if they see me standing with security?! They would say that I was a spy and an informer. Just as security was watching the area, the young men were also watching. I ran away and went down a lane and asked my sister to not look behind her. I did not go to my house but went to the house of one of our relatives.

During my time in criminal security, an officer once came to me, and it was three o'clock in the morning, and he said, "Zainab, tomorrow they will take you to court. Give me your husband and mother's number to tell them, so that they can help you hire a lawyer or secure a connection." I knew him before, but his treatment of us was very kind. I recall two incidents; the first, when they transferred us to criminal security my daughter was no longer eating, he went out of the branch and bought a shawarma sandwich which he hid in his jacket, and when he returned to the branch he pretended to search our room and put the shawarma sandwich aside, and then said to me: "This is for your daughter, let her eat."

The second occasion was when they brought in three women who were prostitutes. They held in criminal security persons accused of various crimes in addition to those accused of participating in demonstrations. With me in the cell was a lady called Umm Hussein, of Algerian origin, residing in al-Ghuzlaniyah. They arrested her with her son who was participating in the demonstrations, because she did not let security take her son and they arrested her with him. Before they brought the three women in, he said to me: "Now there are three notorious bad women coming, sit your daughter between you and Umm Hussein." And indeed, this officer called my mother when I gave him her number and my husband's number and told her that I would face court in the morning. He called my husband's phone but my daughter answered the call. This

officer called him three times until he was able to talk to him, and asked him to come to court at 7 am.

When my daughter and I arrived at the court, I found my husband, sister, notables from Qaboun, a prominent lawyer and four other lawyers from our town, all awaiting me. The judge told me I was charged with causing chaos and insulting the President and organizing protests, and my daughter was charged with the same, it was one file. After the judge signed my release, he asked me to go to the Ruken al-Din court in January 2012.

## The Raids

My daughters and I were organizing demonstrations. On one occasion we threw balls in the Barada River which we had drawn the flag of the revolution on. Thank God they did not raid my house during this period. The first time it was raided, the Free Army and the gunmen were trapped in the building next to my house, and I was not aware of this, and I was then printing bandanas with 'God is great' and drying them in my living room, which is ten meters long and four meters wide. Suddenly I heard gunfire and I rushed to the balcony and I saw people firing towards Qaboun. They were wearing civilian clothes and sneakers. I said to myself, "They do not appear to be from Qaboun." I had no contact with the army. I have only been involved in peaceful activity since the beginning of the revolution until the last moment. I said to my daughters and my friend who was visiting me: "Has security entered the town?" They ran towards the balcony and looked and said: "These are not security, this is the Free Army." I replied, laughing: "What free army? These are Shabiha." At the time, Shabiha from Tishreen used to come with the army wearing civilian clothes. Then suddenly all of Qaboun was closed down, and I saw security forces in front of our house, I quickly collected the bandanas and threw them in the attic and put the mold above the bed, and no sooner had I closed the door than they knocked down the door to my house and came in. They took our cell phones, my daughter had hers which they hid under the seat. They set up in our house, the army spread in the entire building and set up machine guns on the roof, we did not know what was happening, and they put us in a room and closed the door after they had searched the house.

I am strong, and when I was exposed to such situations I become stronger, I felt that I was responsible for those who were with me at home, I opened the door of the room and went out, and found them sitting in the living room, and I said to them: "Peace be upon you, do you want something?" and I started talking to them "Do you want a cup of tea or a cup of coffee? Or shall I make you breakfast?" But they refused and said, "We don't want to eat or drink." When the house phone rang, they raised the handset. My husband was saying "How are you Zainab, what are you doing?" The officer gestured to me to approach and talk to him, and I tried to inform my husband that the army was in our home and he should not say anything, I said, "Hello, how are you Abu Mohammed, we are at home and our affairs are fine, we are in the protection of the Syrian Arab Army." And all my family who called knew the army was in our house and the tank was in front of us, and shooting was all around us, and I would say "Why are you afraid? We are being protected by the Syrian Arab Army."

I kept saying these words so they would trust me, and so one of them said to me: "Let your daughters out of the room." Surprisingly, they did not notice the mold over the bed, even the clippings of the leaflets we printed to scatter in demonstrations were in one of the drawers and they did not notice them when they searched the house.

All my relatives did not expect us to come out alive. Even my sister, who was living in Ghouta, when she learned that we were besieged she phoned and my daughter answered and said "We are at home and the army is here with us." She said "With all the things going on in your house and the things your mother is doing, and they did nothing to you!" Of course, they did not hear this because they had started to trust us and were sitting with us.

They stayed with us in our house from 3 p.m. to 6.30 a.m. They were from the Special Intelligence Branch of the Air Force Intelligence preparing for the clashes. They had to leave so the army raid team could come in to inspect the area. One of them told me "We will leave at 6:30 in the morning, and others will enter the town, it's better to get out of here, you and your daughters." I said to the head of the campaign who was sitting in front of my house: "We won't be able to leave because they won't let us" and he said "When I leave I will take you with me."

After the Special Task Force left my house, they wanted to break the door of an apartment in my building because it was overlooking the school where the FSA was located, and they wanted to enter it and install machine guns. I pleaded with the officer not to break down the door because there were only women and children in the house and they would be terrified, and suggested to I would bring them to my house, and he said to me, "Go." When they saw the army with me, they started to cry. I reassured them and said "They will not hurt you" and brought them into my house and we stayed there until 3 a.m. The officer said to me, "Let them go back to their house. We will leave the apartment, and you and you daughters stay in your home." In the morning I sent word to the officer, through a soldier who came to my house, that my neighbor and I wanted to leave, do we go out or stay in my house? The answer was to get out, and he entrust two agents to accompany us to a safe point.

While they were in my house, the officer's phone broke, he asked me for tape to stick his phone together, and they had cut off the electricity from our area. I brought him the tape and went to the kitchen to bring a knife to cut it. Due to the darkness, I brought him a big cleaving knife. When I gave him the knife, my neighbors started crying. They told him, "What will you do with it?" He replied, "I will slaughter you with it." I reassured them and said "He will not slaughter you, he's fixing his broken phone," but until I managed to explain it they were completely petrified for ten seconds.

In the morning we left our houses, and I found my husband waiting for me outside the besieged area in Qaboun, about one square kilometer, and we went to an area called Abu Jarash where there was a farmhouse belonging to a friend. We stayed there until later afternoon, then went home. They had searched all the houses except my house, and I remembered how one of the officers told me, when he asked me to leave, to close my door and that he would not let anyone in. But we found terrible destruction and burnt houses because the raid team had come in. They had killed five men in the FSA and had surrounded five groups of them, in each group about a dozen young men, most of them I think from Qaboun.

It was a frightening night, when I saw the tank in front of my house and its gun pointed towards us, because the news that arrived to security that the armed group was in our building. I called to the one driving the tank at the time and I said to him: "My son, my brother, there is nobody in the building but women." I came out of my house to talk to him when he did not respond, and I came across the officer as he was going up to our building and told him, "There is no one in the building, ask him to turn the gun away from us." The tank was ready to shell after it had shelled all the buildings around us. He said "I will tell him to turn it away. Who is in the building?" I swore to him that the majority of the houses were empty and the owners had left. No homes were inhabited except my home and the homes of my daughter and my neighbor and the house opposite to mine, and they held US citizenship and were away at the time and living outside Qaboun. So they turned the gun away from us. I have never experienced such a terrifying night, and that was in 2012.

### **Forced displacement**

I did not leave my house even when mortar shells landed on us, I was afraid that what happened with the Palestinians would happen to me, when the Palestinians left their country they could not return, and unfortunately what I feared happened with me later, although I refused to leave however much the army and security forces raided the area. My husband, my children and I stayed in the safe section of my building, the stairway, surrounded by apartments and with three floors above our house. We did not leave our house until a few minutes before surface-to-surface missiles landed on us. At the time, my son was working in a media office and he told us that the regime would bomb our area. We left at four o'clock at dawn in our sleepwear, and we could not take any of our things from our house, and after we reached another area of Qaboun, rockets started landing and clashes intensified on the Homs international highway. This was in August 2012, but the fighting intensified more, so we left again to Ghouta and stayed there for about eight days and then returned to another part of Qaboun. We did not return to my house, and after I left it I did not see it again. It was seized by Iranians in 2013. We left my husband's car near the house and we tried to pay money and mediate to get it out, but the officer who went to bring it told us that the Republican Guard and the Iranians were staying in our house and he could not communicate with them in any way, and could not get the car out of there. All we had left of our house was our sleepwear.

I still cry when I remember my house, and grieve for my country and our past. Nothing is left to remind us of the past but pain, I hope that the regime will fall so we can return to our country, because I cannot return as long as the regime exists. My brothers and I are wanted, four of them were martyred, my cousins were martyred too, Zuhair, Radwan, Suhail, also two cousins on my mother's side, my cousins' husbands, my son-in-law's son, my son-in-law's grandson, about fourteen people killed in my family. There was no possibility of staying, but when I left I said "I will not leave my country until I am forced out." I was always afraid to leave of the country and be unable to return. When they wanted to force us out, I said to my son, "You leave" because I feared for him, "Your father and I will stay here, we are old, and what will the regime do to us!" Then my mother and my brothers left the country as well, and no one remained. I went to say goodbye to them at the entrance to Qaboun where I was

arrested, and I intended not to leave, despite the burning in my heart because I would not see them anymore, but I thought it was better to stay in my country to have some influence, and one day if they returned they would have people here. After I said goodbye to them, I went back. The road was very scary because of the bombing from planes and shells, and the shelling continued and did not stop for almost four months in 2017. After that, the Syrian and Russian warplanes did not leave the sky, all the while bombing us in Qaboun.

I stayed in Ghouta for seven or eight months. Immediately after reaching a ceasefire in Qaboun, after a reconciliation between Barzeh and the regime, they evacuated civilians from Barzeh who had fled to Ghouta and returned them to Barzeh. Qaboun dignitaries intervened so the displaced from Qaboun would also be included to return home, and we took security buses and were searched and we returned. However, in Qaboun there was no reconciliation, but a cease-fire.

When we were in Ghouta, the shelling was almost daily, and I will not forget as long as I live when it was bombed with chemical weapons on August 21, 2013. I saw the bodies with my own eyes. People, like soil when it is unloaded off a truck and falls in a huge pile, the bodies looked like that stacked on top of each other. At the time I went to the medical centers like everyone else, to help however I could. We sprayed water and people and washed them, the women took care of the women who had some consciousness still, and we took them to our houses away from the area of the strike. Because the people of Ghouta are conservative and women are separated from men, we all worked together, it was an unforgettable day.

They also bombed Qaboun with gases, but not as much as they bombed Ghouta. I remember that before I fled to Ghouta, the regime bombarded a tunnel that connected Qaboun and the industrial zone, it was a passage for people to cross the road, under the Homs International Highway. They dug a tunnel and connected it with the main tunnel, where the regime did not have agents posted, but they still used it. The main tunnel had ventilation holes. At the time, the army bombed the tunnel with gases. I heard from the people that it used chemical weapons. I was in Qaboun at the time and helping in a medical center, although I didn't work there. I used to get the medicine from Damascus and contact doctors to provide it. I used to go with my daughters to get the medicine in a car, we were afraid, but we always prepared for the soldiers at the checkpoints beer and whiskey, which the driver of the car bought, and sometimes we would buy them cigarettes and food, and give it to them so they do not search us, and of course they did not know we had medicines, we hid them in the seats and sat on them, then we would deliver them to medical points. After some time, however, Qaboun was surrounded, and all its exits were closed except one on the road to the Ghofran Mosque, there was no security barrier but a sniper overlooked it, so we would park the car next to a shop in Abu Jarash, and transport the medicines in stages to a vegetable shop to cover our tracks, then the young men would carry the medicine to Qaboun, and deliver it to the field hospitals.

We were preparing needles for inflammation in large quantities, because they were much needed, in addition to blood bags we were bringing from the Mujtahid Hospital. When the battle broke out in Ain Manin we would deliver the bags to a man who later was killed, and at the peak of the fighting we also delivered many blood bags through a defecting officer.



This was our work, and I did anything I was asked to do, and sometimes I brought cameras and printer inks into Qaboun and Ghouta, thank God not once did they catch me or suspect me, I worked with my daughters and sister Nahla, but we did not go out together, so if one was arrested the rest of us would remain.

### Activities

Our activities were not limited to medicines and demonstrations, but we were doing other activities in the revolution. On the first anniversary of the revolution and to encourage young people, I brought bags of chocolate, candy, and a rosary inside and also placed a revolutionary flag in it. I distributed the bags to young men taking part in demonstrations on Revolution Day.

My activities in the revolution were peaceful and humanitarian, and I could not find any young man demonstrating without my rosary of the revolution around his neck, they even came from outside Qaboun to ask for them. During the period of heavy raids in our area, my husband told me he wanted to rent a house at the entrance of Qaboun, the area where I was arrested and it was affiliated with the regime. It is located between the area controlled by the FSA and the area controlled by the regime. We rented a house from a supporter of the regime and stayed there for three months. The owner didn't know of our activities during the revolution, sometimes when the raids campaigns came, we could not leave our house, and we could not reach the house we had rented, which we used to go to in order to rest after the end of the raids, although I did not like it because it was in the regime area, and I felt more freedom in my house.

Preparations for the demonstrations were filmed on a number of television channels, things such as writing banners and making the balls that we had thrown in the Barada River. We once brought white boards to float on the water, and we painted the flag of the revolution, threw it into the river and threw balls from Mount Qasioun that went as far as Ruken al-Din, which overlooks the Mazraa and Afif areas, all of which belong to the regime. We also colored many of the fountains in Damascus streets. All of those preparations took place in my house. One time in 2011 I went out with my daughters and a young man, now he is the husband of one of my daughters, in a demonstration on Mourched Khater Street and we blocked the road and then escaped.

Some activities were prepared in a house on Baghdad Street. The owner of this house, Saif, was killed by security when he tried to visit his besieged family. When the young people feared that the regime suspected a house, they brought all the items there such as flags and banners and put them in the house I rented in 2012.

When I rented the house, my brother-in-law's son was with me. When the owner called his phone she heard bullets and thought it was in her house and she called immediately and said she wanted her house back. My brother-in-law's son told me she was calling me but my phone was out of coverage, and she wants to evacuate the house, and I actually went to evacuate, and took my belongings to my house inside Qaboun, and the next morning my husband took me to her house by car to hand her the keys, and when the owner of the house delayed the agreed time I told her: "I have obligations and I want to go, and you promised me at ten, now it's 11.30." During the call I heard the sound of radios, I was afraid and I said: "Where are you?" She said: "I am at the checkpoint," and despite my great fear I stayed in the house, and brought the

remaining bag and put it near the door, and I said to myself that I would give her the key and take my bag and walk away and will not stay for one minute. When she arrived she entered directly and opened the closets and toured the house and searched it and asked about the Free Army if they were in the house, it terrified me, and I told her: "What free army while the regime is near the house!" I gave her the keys and I walked away quickly, I forgot my bag which I put in front of the door in of fear, and when I got to a place between the park and the mosque, fifty meters from her house, I found the army coming towards me with their machine guns and shooting at people, I ran quickly and entered the town, five meters away from where I was, and they raided the house that I had rented, because the owner of the house had told them that the FSA was inside the house, although my brother-in-law's son was not visiting me there, and was not even with the FSA when he accompanied me to rent her house, but joined them later, but his mobile number remained her, and she had called him when my phone was out of coverage. When the army raided her house, they shot my cousin who was going to work in the morning, because his house was close to her house, he was martyred, and whenever they entered a place they would shoot anyone in front of them. They caught my other cousin, the brother of the young man who was martyred, beat him and then killed him in front of his mother. I thank God for entering the safe area, because they would be ready to fight the FSA any time they entered an area.

### **Life during the siege of Ghouta**

There was no electricity of course, and every fifteen days, we used to buy water and save on using it, so we only bathed every twenty days. I had a little money, and it was the beginning of the siege, before it intensified, I bought whatever I found available, like a kilo of bulgur and a kilo of rice, I was buying anything I find, and of course the prices were very expensive and there was no bread, we ate bread made of animal feed. When I ate it I had food poisoning and allergies and blue spots spread in my body. We used to eat just one meal a day to survive. We were always hungry, we ate little food. We didn't know what would happen tomorrow or the day after.

My husband was waiting for the shelling to stop to go out to the orchards, and prepare what he could find with the vegetables that were growing there, we cooked and ate anything, thankfully I came out of Ghouta much better than others, and the food I was cooking my husband was taking to people who had no money to eat.

There were a lot of armed factions, but we did not come into contact with them and did not approach them in any way. In particular, we did not like the Army of Islam because they were like the regime, the same prisons, detention, torture and suppression of freedoms. In Duma, my sister and I went to buy bulgur, we heard that it is sold in Duma, and I cannot forget that scene, people almost dying of extreme hunger, and the Army of Islam had in the warehouse meat, blue cheese which we saw in Turkey and did not eat, soft drinks, all of which were a luxury, and weren't available to us. After a raid, people would pick up the food and walk away with it.

The cost of bathing was fifteen thousand SP, and we had to bring firewood in order to heat the water on it. We used to cook, for example, bulgur and put it in a pot of tea, or put spinach or hibiscus with it.

We were five people in the house, my daughters, my daughter's fiancē and my husband, and I was cooking a cup or a cup and a half of bulgur, and we were like this for about eight months until we returned to the besieged Qaboun. My son was there. He did not go out with us to Ghouta because he is a photographer and a documenter. He wanted to stay with the trapped.

When I got out of Ghouta, I was, as they say, "bones and flesh." We did not go to our house but lived in a house whose owners had left and my husband knew. My son cleaned it before we arrived.

When I saw my son, he looked scary, like the hungry in Somalia, I asked him, "what were you eating?" He said, "Nothing but soup. We were looking at the destroyed houses for anything that would sustain us." Qaboun is not like Ghouta because it is small and remained besieged. Eight months in 2013 and nothing came in.

During the siege, we had no access except through Barzeh. The port was closed and prices were rising more.

My husband had some money and we were spending it until we went back to Qaboun. My son was working for a news agency and we were spending from his salary. I started working with my daughters' husbands making shoes, and I brought the work home. Before the revolution, I did not work, but after I returned to Qaboun I worked twice, first making shoes and now in Turkey. I brought the work from the shoe workshop outside Qaboun to work on in my house after being searched by officers at the checkpoints.

On one occasion, my daughter and I were outside Qaboun to see a doctor. The Barzeh road was blocked due to clashes between the Shabiha from Ash al-Warwar and the Barzeh people. I walked home, despite the distance, because the checkpoints were less stressful, but I was tired and I was carrying things. I asked the taxi driver to take me to Barzeh. I did not dare tell him that I am a resident of Qaboun, because there was a reconciliation between Barzeh and the regime. He began to insult the people of Qaboun and say: "Those dogs, those whores, they shot my brother yesterday, I will rape their mothers in front of their eyes," and my daughter looked at him anger, and he said to her: "You don't approve?!" He started threatening her, and I said, "My son, please, we have nothing to do with them." This happened before reaching the checkpoint and when we arrived we were searched thoroughly, so I said: "we are trying to make a living, and if we had money we would have rented out of the area, my son, we bring these shoes to work." I was afraid of him and I thought he was going to take us to Ash al-Warwar and then to the Shabiha, they would slaughter us and we wouldn't come out alive or they would ask for a huge ransom. Then he calmed down, and stopped a hundred meters from the entrance of Barzeh and told us to get out and said: "Teach you daughter how to behave, she is despicable." He said these obscene insults only because my daughter looked at him angrily, and she did not like to hear her people being insulted.

Despite the arrest, siege, raids and shelling, the harshest thing I went through was when I left my country, I overcame everything, but when I looked back I said to myself: "I will not see my country again" I was overwhelmed and cried desperately. The area where I was born and lived my life has a special place in my heart. Thank God I was

not arrested while I was passing through the checkpoints in Damascus, but in the areas near mine they didn't ask for my ID because they all knew me as (Umm Mohammed).

## Checkpoints

On one occasion, I had an accident at a checkpoint. My niece, three months old, was sick and needed to go to a hospital. I was not able to get out of our area, because all my brothers were wanted by the regime. And my sister and I, who was in Ghouta, took her to the children's hospital. We had to pass through al-Maliki checkpoint near the hospital, and the agent at the checkpoint asked us for IDs, and my ID says I'm from Qaboun and my sister is from Harasta. He said to us: "What are you doing here, your areas are surrounded and contain terrorists?" I replied that we do not live there but with our relatives in Mazraa, but he checked my sister's identity, so I immediately claimed that we had divorced my sister from her husband because he was in Ghouta and we do not want problems. At the time he was checking our IDs, the officer came and asked where we came from and where we would go, and after half an hour they left us, and we stayed forty days in the Children's Hospital, until my niece healed and I took her with me back to Qaboun. I was accompanied by my young daughter, my sister who lives in Barzeh and the orphan children of my brother, who we put in an orphanage. We were bringing them to visit Qaboun every Thursday and Friday. We had to cross into Qaboun through an area called Barzeh al-Gharbiya, but we found that the army closed the area. We stood waiting in the cold for a long time until I asked the agents: "When will you open the road?" He replied, "Auntie, open what way? Take the girls who are with you and walk." I knew the principal of a school who was living in the region, I called her and told her what happened with us and asked to go to her house and wait, but my sister and daughter preferred to stay, and I moved the children out of fear of the cold to my friend's house. I came back to the checkpoint and found that the checkpoint took the IDs of both my sister and my daughter. I told them, "Let's walk," but the agent refused and said they would be detained in the mosque with fifty women. I still remember the date of this; March 19, 2016, just before Mother's Day. The women remained in the mosque for twenty days, I did not want my daughter and sister to be held in the mosque, the army surrounded the area and the agents were bad and despicable, cursing people and throwing their things on the ground. During my attempt to take my daughter and sister, one of them cursed me and said: "Where do you think you are? Take off, bitch, another word and you will be detained with them." I moved away after he cursed me, one of the military was watching me during my frequent exits from Qaboun, and he was always nice to me, he saw what happened, and he said to me: "Aunt stand to the side, I will try to bring them," but the officer who insulted me prevented him. He repeated his attempt and said to him, "They are my relatives," until his attempts succeeded, but afterwards the officer insulted all the women there with the worst insults and said to them, "Whores, why are you out of your houses at night? Your men are in there and you are out here whoring." The soldier brought me my daughter and sister with their IDs, and we left. The next day, I contacted someone to help me return to Qaboun, and a group of Qaboun residents communicated with the residents of Barzeh. In turn, they contacted the members of the political security checkpoint so we were able to enter. There was no barrier between Qaboun and the regime because the regime had closed off the area.

## Shelling

Despite the announced ceasefire agreement between Qaboun and the regime, the regime occasionally bombarded us. Once in 2014, the regime bombed a wedding in Qaboun and killed thirteen young people. Then the regime bombed a children's school and the scene was tragic. My nephews were inside the school. One morning I woke up to the sound of mortar shells over us. My two daughters were sleeping in the living room. My husband said to me, "I can no longer tolerate this bombing." He went down to the basement, but I refused to go down and I said, "Let me die in my house" and as soon as I closed the door the shell landed opposite our house, thank God, if I had approached just a little, and if my daughters were not sleeping on the ground wrapped in four blankets because of the cold, we would have been hit by shrapnel from the shells that entered the room where we were. Glass from the windows and the chandelier broke and fell on us. I found shrapnel beside my daughters. People would ask me "What prayers are you saying for your house, to keep away the missiles??!"

Throughout this period, we did not take off our abayas and veils and stayed in the basement. Ten rockets all fired together. We couldn't take our clothes off because the FSA was outside, I couldn't leave the area for four months, I was cooking for them, feeding them and washing their clothes.

## Relationship with the community

When I was arrested, my husband went to the Qaboun police station to give them my ID, which they then sent to the Air Force Intelligence. The Colonel asked my husband why we were detained and he told him the truth. He was moved and so was the lawyer and they said to him "Be proud of them" My husband still cries when he tells this story.

When I got out, my husband, sister and notables were waiting for me, along with five lawyers. My mother was waiting for me at her home. When we arrived, she started kissing us, crying and praising God for seeing us. "I lost hope I would see you again because those who are taken by the regime do not return."

Then I went to my house near my mother's house, and I had to first take a shower because I smelt so bad. I went into my bedroom to get clean clothes before the shower and my husband was behind me. I said: "I will tell you two words if you believe me, good, if you do not believe me, it's up to you, I swear by Almighty God that no one has touched me." He said "I believe you because you don't lie."

When my husband's family came to congratulate me on my release, their gestures suggested a question: "How do you walk in the street now?!" That is to say, "I am a former prisoner!" I told them "I'm not a criminal, I was taken without charge or suspicion. I was arrested for something to be proud of, and I don't care what people say, I'm not ashamed." But my daughter was sad because her friends would not speak to her when she was released, and I told her to befriend others, "we are in a revolution and have no time for friends."

After a while I went to visit my husband's sister, and she and he sat alone, and she said to my husband: "Your wife came out of prison, she is married and has children, but did

you examine your daughter at the doctor's?" My husband replied and said: "I did not and will not take her, my wife told me that no one touched her, and if anyone touched her, it is beyond her control and no one can hold her accountable." I was upset by these words, what my husband said is true, even if anything happened with us, it is beyond our control, and if they tried to rape us, I would have deterred them no matter how strong they were, but what bothered me was I did not imagine the magnitude of her rudeness to say to me what she said, and to question me and my daughter. Even my husband was annoyed by her words and told me: "she wasn't even worried I might be upset."

No matter how civilized and liberal we are, our society remains an oriental society, my relationship with my sister-in-law has changed and I am no longer visiting her. After several months she died and I went only to offer my condolences. My daughter, despite her arrest, was requested for marriage by a lot of young men. The arrest was honorable, and they want a woman with such courage. That gave me hope. People do not all think in one way. But I did not approve of anyone who came to request my daughter, even though they were family, because she was continuing her studies.

Although the torment of detention is the same for women and men, women suffer from the society's attitudes, and I suffered a lot from that, but I was able to overcome it because I am free to do what I want to do, and some people from Qaboun were saluting me after I left prison.

Before my arrest, my heart was very good and still is, so far, but after I came out of detention I saw people looked at us differently. Prison is difficult and taking away your freedom is very difficult, and during my arrest I thought that I would never get out, because they caught me red-handed writing on the walls, and however much I denied they would not believe me. I was scared for my children who were out of prison.

My arrest affected my husband, and he could not respond to his sister with words other than what he told her because she is older than him, but he did not keep quiet to anyone who offends us with a hint or a statement, he was responding decisively and saying: "I know that my wife and daughter could be arrested at any moment, they were exposed to anything that could happen, and I accepted everything that happened with us during the revolution." Because my husband lost everything he owned in the revolution and had nothing left, when we left to Turkey we did not have any money except the fare of the road, the money that was with us enabled us to reach the border, and we did not have money to rent a house, we even sold the camera that was with my son in Idlib so that we could reach Turkey, we stayed for some time with our relatives, my husband and my son worked until we were able to rent a house, and at first we slept on the floor for a month. But thankfully, after a while our situation improved and we started to buy one thing after another, and confined it to the necessary only.

I had no contact with family and neighbors, and during the revolution my relationship was only with those working in the revolution, there was no room for visits and occasions. Before the revolution my cousin died from an anonymous shot, and months before the revolution my cousins were both killed. At the beginning of the revolution, my brother was martyred, and in July before my arrest, security took my brother during his participation in a night protest. He remained for one year and nine months in the Air Force Intelligence in Mazzeah. He only came out after my brothers kidnapped an

officer to exchange him and get him out of detention. I have another brother who died in detention and they arrested him in 2014. In 2017 they asked us to receive his items from the mayor of Qaboun.

After all that has happened with me, I have become accustomed to this life, and I no longer feel safe except in my area. Sometimes I had to sleep outside Qaboun, when I had things and I could not pass through the checkpoints with them. I waited for the next day, and I slept at one of our relatives or acquaintances in Damascus, but I did not feel comfortable, and sometimes I could not pass through the checkpoint because of intense searches or raids.

On one occasion in 2016, I was returning to Qaboun, and I had some money to buy clothes for orphaned children and martyrs' children on the occasion of Eid. The next day I brought the money in with me normally. At the checkpoint, he said to me, "Aunt, do you want to marry me?" I told him "I will find you a bride from here" and he said "Yes your girls are pretty," and we walked together and crossed the barrier and no one talked to me and I was able to bring in the money.

## **Idlib**

My life was different after the revolution. Our financial situation used to be wonderful. We were now at the bottom of the boat. I entered the camp in Idlib after they deported us on June 17, 2017. I could only stay there for two hours and I left because of the unpleasant smells, the crowded presence of women and children, and the very bad conditions of the people. I was crying and telling my husband: "I never accepted the idea of being in the camp at all, even though I suffered war and siege, and lack of the necessities of life, everything I could take and adapt with, it was easier than to live in the camp."

I stayed in Idlib for one month, and I went to Turkey on June 18, 2017, three days before Eid al-Fitr. I wanted to stay in Idlib, but because of the factions there, I took my son to Turkey before I left. For honestly, I was afraid of Jabhat al-Nusra. I saw them when I came down to the Idlib market. They forced the women to wear the niqab, and in Qaboun we usually wear coats down to the knee and underneath we wear pants and stockings. They wanted us to wear "robes down to the soles of our feet."

## **ISIS**

ISIS had been in Qaboun for some time in late 2016, and they were not declaring to people their affiliation, but remained sleeper cells, they entered our country to volunteer with them to strengthen their cells. Then they harassed the original inhabitants of Qaboun. One of them insulted my daughter because she was wearing a short jacket, and my daughter said to him: "You have nothing to do with my clothes, and you're not a member of my family to talk to me, even my father and brother do not interfere in my clothes, I wear what makes me comfortable." He cursed her and said to her, "Your father didn't know how to raise you," and when my daughter told her uncles what had happened with her, they were furious and said: "By what right does he stop our daughters!" And they attacked them and killed some of them and the others fled

from our town, they were not all from Qaboun, two young ones were killed, and three arrested, they were from al-Salhiyeh and Ruken al-Din.

### **Honoring**

I attended the Women's Day in honor of the Syrian Coalition held in Turkey in March 2018, in which they honored some of the women who participated in the revolution and I knew them. There are women who deserve to be honored and no one mentioned them. I felt that we are not done with favoritism. We left our country and did not change, someone who knows so-and-so puts her name on the list of honors, and they do not look at her struggle or history and her work, the standards are connections; although we left our country, and our souls and our country were destroyed, we did not get rid of the favoritism that we have lived all our lives under, we went out in a revolution for change, but no difference! I came out of the hall and I was very depressed, even when I got home I didn't talk about it and I cried, and my family was asking me what happened, but I could not tell them at first, and when they knew after their insistence they told me: "You have every right to grieve, but we can do nothing. We have done everything we can." Some of those who were honored were families of the martyred, but there is no house in Syria without one martyr or two or three martyrs, and what has this honor to do with the participation of women in the revolution! All of those killed in the revolution are our children.

I was not disturbed because I was not honored. I did not work for the revolution for honor, but for a cause that I believed in. Since the beginning of the revolution and for seven years, I have not received a single penny from anyone or any party, and never received any support, but on the contrary, our financial conditions at the beginning of the revolution were very good. I used to spend from my own money and at my expense. Even banners, flags, etc. I used to buy with my money. Even my daughters had gold bracelets and necklaces, two identical pieces of gold, I had a white gold ring, and my daughter sold these gold pieces without telling me. The ring was a gift from my husband. He gave it to me during the revolution. I was afraid because it was dear to me. My daughter borrowed it from me and sold it because there was a lack of equipment in the office. I was not sad because it went in support of the revolution.

### **Final word**

We want to hold Bashar al-Assad accountable because he is the first and last person responsible for the destruction of Syria, he brought the Iranians, Russians and everyone into our country, and I am determined to file a lawsuit against him because he has destroyed our past and our present. He did not leave anything but destroyed, and nothing is fair to me except holding Bashar accountable, and I want nothing in this life but his fall and accountability, because he is the head and we have to start with him, and after he is held accountable we will hold accountable with him all the criminals in the security branches, and also the factions because they were criminals against us too, like the regime, they are no different from him, except in name, and collectively all faction leaders have committed crimes against the people. I do not exclude anyone, all kinds of factions entered Qaboun, and no one dared to raise a finger. On one occasion, a person was killed at night because he was reconciling with the regime,



another person who was also reconciling with the regime was kidnapped and handed him over to the Army of Islam and in turn they killed him in Duma, after he was accused of being a traitor and agent of the regime. He was one of the group that negotiated with the regime over Qaboun in the last period of the war.

I wanted to document my story because I am proud of what I have done and I do not want to be forgotten. I participated in the revolution because I believed in it, and I am not sad for everything that I have been through and what happened with me. In the future, God willing, we will take our rights. God willing. If I do not trust my daughter and sister, how will people know about the crimes committed by the regime against the country?

I have many stories that I did not tell, because I was under siege and raids, and I thank God that my daughter and son are with me now, and my son is working and I also work, but I stopped working now because of pain in my joints, due to the extreme cold I suffered in prison.



## Meeting in the slaughterhouse<sup>5\*</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> - Lula al-Agha, interview with the author via WhatsApp, on: February 09, 2019, duration: 3.40 hours.

\*Cover By: Salam Al Hassan



SALAM ALHASSAN

My name is Lula al-Agha from Salaheddine neighborhood in Aleppo city. Born in 1984, married with four children. I reached grade nine in my education. I did not finish my education because I got married early when I was sixteen. I got married and left school because of traditions. Where society stereotyped that "a woman is for her home and her children, and she does not need a certificate." My husband was arrested and martyred under torture, and now I am in Turkey.

Since the beginning of the revolution in Egypt in 2011, I hoped that the revolution will reach Syria. Perhaps this regime would fall. I am opposed, but my family was neither opposition nor pro-regime.

The first area in Aleppo where demonstrations took place was our area; Salaheddine, which was also the first liberated area from the regime. In the beginning, I did not work-up the courage to participate in demonstrations, but I was one of its supporters. Subsequently, I started meeting every Saturday with my friends; a group of opposition doctors to exchange opinions. After the FSA stationed in some houses, we had to leave our homes and leave medical supplies in them, such as; gauze and medicines, to help the wounded, because the FSA was going to stay in Salaheddine area.

Once, while my friend and I were leaving after our weekly meeting, there was a demonstration, where we subconsciously found ourselves in the middle of it and we started chanting with them. It was my first demonstration. Unfortunately, a young man was killed in front of us, after the Shabiha attacked, as usual. One of the Shabiha was a butcher in our area, and he killed the young man with a cleaver he carried in his hand. Where all of his inner organs came out on the ground. We will never forget what happened for as long as we live, which made us more determined to increase our participation in the demonstrations, and we started searching for them and inviting our friends and acquaintances to participate with us by texting on social media.

I participated in three demonstrations, one of them was in the university dorms, but my husband prevented me from participating later, for fear of the regime, and because I was pregnant in the fourth month. He didn't want to participate either in pro-rallies or demonstrations, so I stopped participating, but whenever a demonstration passed by my house, I used to give the protesters water when they ask, or give them the hose and sprinkle them with water, the weather was very hot, and I laugh when I remember those moments.

The FSA in our area was formed from individuals who came from Anadan, Idlib and some youth of Salaheddine. The period between peaceful demonstrations and formation of the FSA was only one month, and some of them were demonstrating with civilians.

On the first of Ramadan, the FSA announced its control over Salaheddine area, which was threatened that the regime will bomb it. So we went out with the civilians and started to move from one area to another.

I returned to my normal life and distanced myself from politics. After a while, and because of our displacement from a place to another, I asked my husband to return to my home in the liberated area, but he refused because he was an employee in the railway lines, and later we moved to live in a room in the railway facility.

In 2013, my brother in law, Muhammad, reported me, he told the security that I was participating in demonstrations. On October 20, 2013, three members of the air force intelligence branch broke into my house. They arrested me while my husband and children were in the house after they took my one-year-old daughter from my hands and throw her on the floor. My husband couldn't speak during this, but one of them reassured him and told him that my stay with them was only of ten minutes, that it was only a matter of a question and answer, and that I would be returned to him soon. Then they "blindfolded" me, "handcuffed" me and took me.

### **Air Force Intelligence**

When I arrived at the air force intelligence branch, I was taken underground where my blindfold was lifted from my eyes and I was taken to the bathroom. I saw the jailer who looked like a wrestler in the circuit. He asked me to take off my clothes for inspection, but I refused at the beginning, so he slapped me on the face and said: "if you don't take your clothes, I will" It was an order and I have to obey. He asked me after I became naked to bend. The inspection took two minutes, and then they put me in an individual cell, one square meter in length, and one meter wide. The investigator called me after half an hour, and once I entered he started beating me and didn't ask me any question, I asked him to know what is my charge, he said to me: "do you want freedom?" and started cursing me, and he put his military shoes over my head and said: "This shoe is better than you and your family" he didn't stop insulting me and cursing me with words came known to everyone.

I stayed like this for four days. Every day they hit me, crucified me, and used electricity to torture me. Once they crucified me for five hours. Crucifying "Shabeh" is iron pieces attached in the ceiling of the room, where hands are hanged in it, and the detainee is left standing on the tips of her toes. There are other ways of crucifixion specialized for men, one of the detainees told me that his crucifixion was to twist his hands and tie them with iron pieces, but mine was in the way I mentioned. After four days, the investigation started. Questions were confined in me participating in demonstrations and providing the FSA with information, and of course, I denied that. They accused me of transferring information because the protest case was old. In 2013 there were no more demonstrations, and I think it was added to reinforce my detention.

I was thinking about my children and my house all the time. The weather was cold, and the day before my arrest I was cooking rice soup on the fireplace, and while I was washing the dishes, the fireplace overturned with the soup on the carpet, and the fire broke out. I turned it off, washed the carpet and left it to dry, and one carpet remained in my big room. When I was arrested I was concerned about my children. The room in my house was cold, and my little girl was still breastfeeding. I imagined that they will arrest my husband. I once heard them investigating with an old man, asking him about his three children. He denied knowing their place, and I was surprised that they arrested them and brought them to the branch, where the father wanted to take all the charges instead of them, and they wanted to take the whole case instead of their father. They began to speak contradicting words to each other, and they were lost. So I thought about my husband, and I was afraid they would arrest him, and every time I hear a voice, I thought it was his. They interrupted my thoughts in this, by torturing me and crucifying me and when they call me to the investigation at three or five in the

morning. I was crucified four times during the ten days I spent in the branch, and then I was transferred to criminal security.

I know the reasons that made my brother in law report me to the security. He is sterile and can't have children, and my husband's family was from the Shabiha. All the people in Aleppo knew that they are Shabiha, and my relationship with them wasn't good. When I was pregnant in my daughter, they prayed to God for the baby inside me to die, and my husband was a very wise man and asked me always not to listen to their prayers, and I didn't respond to them, but I really didn't expect him to tell the security about me!

After I gave birth to my daughter, and as a result of overpricing, our financial situation declined. My husband began to borrow money from his brother, and he gave him, but he asked my husband to register my little daughter under his name, and honestly my husband agreed to his request, but I refused and told my husband: "she can sleep at their place, they can raise her, but to register her under his name I don't agree, and I refuse that my daughter calls him dad and calls his wife mother. Even if I have ten children I would cut off from my flesh and not give him my daughter as if I sold her."

Problems between my husband and me increased because of this issue, we even reached divorce, and I left the house, but my husband knew that his parents didn't want to raise my son and my two oldest daughters. My mother in law won't raise my oldest son, and my sister in law didn't want to raise my middle daughter. So he was afraid about the kids to get lost without their mother, so he asked me to return home. I told him: "If my little daughter is returned, I would return, and if you gave her up to your brother, I would leave you all the children." He changed his mind, and I returned home, and problems ended between him and me, but my brother in law got angry and told my husband three days before my arrest that he will report me to the security, and when my husband told me, I started to worry and dreamed that the air forces branch arrested me for a while and released me after. When I woke up, I called my neighbor and asked her to take care of my children and told her about a dream, and told her that my arrest would be for a short period, and truly I was arrested the next day.

### **Criminal branch**

I was taken out of the air intelligence branch at eleven in the morning after they blindfolded and handcuffed me. They took me to the criminal security department in Aleppo, where they removed the blindfold from my eyes. A police officer searched me and they took me to a basement that contained about twenty cells. I cannot forget the smells I inhaled in this branch. It was a strange stinking smell, a mixture of urine, blood, and stool. Then they put me in a cell containing nearly forty girls. Their charges were different, and the less was political charges, only four girls were politically charged, and the other charges were murder, embezzlement, and drugs. We used to sleep on our side because it was crowded, there was a bathroom inside the room with no door and next to it a water tap for drinking, washing, bathing and the toilet use. I saw through the hole in our cell's door, large numbers of men standing close to each other, and they don't have any possibility to move or sit, even one of them his face was facing the hole in the iron door of the cell.

My conditions were miserable since I entered the criminal security branch. One of my toes got infected from the severity of my torture in the air intelligence, and its condition worsened more in the criminal branch due to spread of germs. I even got a fever, and of course, there was no doctor or treatment.

My torture in criminal security was less than torture in the air branch. I was beaten only by "Lakhdar Brahimi." Although it was beating and torture, it was more merciful than the brutal torture I suffered from at the air branch. I did not change my words and did not admit that I was participating in demonstrations. I kept telling them during my investigations that I was a mother, and I was pregnant.

Three days later I was transferred to the judge in al-Addas building in al-Jdaideh. "They chained us" in the criminal security, us girls in a chain like a sheep, and they did the same with the men and put us in an individual cell until we were called by the judge.

The judge asked me about my relationship with terrorism. I replied, "Nothing." I remember his question, and I laugh. I was barefoot in court because I couldn't wear my shoes because of the severe infection in my feet. Maybe, the judge will notice and have mercy and release me due to my condition.

They returned me to the cell in the criminal security for 'searching'. They brought us food, which is usually white beans with a number of cockroaches, and of course I couldn't eat even though the girls asked me to, but I told them that I will eat with my children and my husband. One hour later, the jailer came and called another girl who was with us and didn't say my name, then he left, so I called him and said to him "what about me?" He said to me, "What is your name?" When I said my name, he said to me, "What are you doing here? Come on go out." They forgot my name and if I did not remind them by myself, I would have stayed in prison.

### **The way to my house**

I received my ID card and left at seven-thirty evening, the distance between the criminal security and my house takes about five minutes, but I forgot where my house was, and I did not know in which direction to walk! I went to the criminal security checkpoint and showed them the stamp on my hand, which indicated that they have released me and asked them: "Where is the train station?" And they gave me the direction.

I was walking barefoot on the road of the train station which filled with gravel and stones, and I forgot where to go again even though I lived and was raised in this area! I saw from a distance a group of men, and approached them and asked them about the paint workshop, but they were surprised by my strange look! They might have thought that somebody attacked me, so I told them I was at the criminal branch, after asking me about my last name. They told me: "We know your brother, thank God you're safe." Then they took me to my house and left, and thank God I remembered its place, I knocked the door quietly like any ordinary visitor to make my return a surprise to my family, but no one opened! I started yelling with my kid's names, Hamodeh, Saad, and my husband Ahmad. Then I went to my neighbor and didn't find her as well. I found a group of men near my house. I asked them about my husband and told them I am his wife, but they told me: "His wife is in the air intelligence branch!" I said to them: "Yes.



And now I am out." They did not believe it, because who enters the air branch does not come out. They told me that my husband was arrested one day after my arrest by the Political Security branch. I was shocked and knew that he will not come back, and spontaneously with loud voice said: "May God never forgive you Mohammad you killed your brother" the young man asked me to go to the train station guard, who was called Abu Bakri to get more information from him, and I went, and he told me that the political branch arrested my husband and arrested twenty of his colleagues while they were at work. No one knows anything about them until now. I asked him about my children's place. He told me they were with my brother in law Mohammad.

I forgot my pain in the middle of my crisis, I didn't have my room key and didn't know where to go! So I went to a person named Ramez, who is in charge of the station, and he is from Latakia. He asked me about my story. I told him what happened, but with caution, as if I am talking to an investigator in a security branch, not with a normal person, so he asked me to sleep in his office. I closed the door and stayed in the room, but I was shaking, maybe because of fear or because of my shock in my husband's arrest and the loss of my kids, I wanted anyone to be safe with, and suddenly I heard a voice calling out; "Lola open the door," she was my neighbor so I opened the door and ran towards her, and I started shaking and crying. She took me to her house after she said to me: "What keeps you here, come sleep in my house" she lit the stove and prepared the bath for me. I had lice and filled with all kinds of insects. And after I bathed, she gave me medicine to sterilize my toe, and another medicine for fever and infection. On the next day I had to get my children back and face my brother in law. I decided between myself to ignore the report he wrote for the security to take my children and to leave me alone.

I took with me two residents from the station as witnesses. I went to the neighborhood where my brother in law lives so that he won't falsely claim anything that didn't happen. He saw me in the street by chance. I didn't know his house location. I told him, "I came to take my daughter." He said: "yes, yes," he was shocked when he saw me while whispering: "How did you get out of the air defense branch?!"

He walked in front of me towards his house, but he made a mistake in the building and returned, then he made a mistake again on the floor. When he entered his house to get my daughter, I stood in front of the door and didn't enter. I heard his wife's voice screaming, "No, I don't want to give her a girl, we were saying that she died" I took my daughter as if I didn't hear anything, but my oldest son was in the Jamelaiah area with his aunt, my daughter was with her second aunt, and my younger son Saad was in Binyamin village at his other aunt. Each of my children was in a place, but I brought the four of them in the same day, I returned to my room and they gave me a copy of its key after opening the door for me. The room is owned by the state and given to my husband since he is a displaced employee, and I had the right to stay there as long my husband is not charged.

I had to look for work to support my children because my parents and my family in law refused to support me and my children. My family conditioned their support if I leave my children to my husband's family, but I refused. They always warned me about my family in law and told me, "They lost their son by their hands!" my connection with them was by phone only because they were afraid of my visit. They were afraid and didn't ask about me when I was arrested. The distance between my room and my

brother's house was only five minutes walking, but he didn't come to visit me after I was released because of fear.

Although I didn't work before and I don't have any skill to work, but I found an advertisement asking for girls to work in a factory to sew brides' dresses, so I went to it, and all the questions asked by the "boss" during the interview are related to my sewing knowledge in this type of dresses I answered him positively. Even though I didn't know it, but I was determined to work and learn. He said to me: My weekly fee, for now, is one thousand five hundred SP. My salary will increase according to my work. I agreed to what he said. Then he took me to a room with four people inside it, two young men and two girls, and I started picking-up what one of them is doing to learn. She was holding the glue gun and sticking diamonds on a wedding dress, so I laid one of the dresses and started doing the same as they do. They were even convinced that I was working in this profession. I remember those days, and I laugh. I learned quickly, and my salary increased in the second week and became two thousand SP. My work was from 9.30 in the morning to 5.30 evenings, and sometimes I stayed for two more hours to get five hundred SP. My younger daughter needed milk and diapers, in addition to my house expenses. My youngest son Saad was accompanying me to work, to cut the strings I was given money for that. I used to leave my oldest son at home with his five years old sister to look after their youngest sister. I stayed like this for three months, and then I started asking about my husband and confirmed that he was in the political security branch. One of my husband's friends connected me with someone in the same branch who can help me and release him. I met him, and he asked for fifty thousand SP in return, I made a deal with him to give him the money when I receive my husband, and he agreed.

Of course, I didn't have the money or even one lira. I told my mother in law about it and sent her son Mohammad with me to meet the person. The interview concluded that Muhammad will think about it, but told me after the meeting that he didn't have the money, knowing that their finances were very good, and that they have three houses they rent. When the person who's working in the branch knew that my family in law won't pay, he called me and asked me to get my brother in law out of it, and he invited me to go over to find a solution. I understood his goal and closed my mobile phone forever, and didn't open it again. Two weeks after I was arrested for the second time.

### **The Second Arrest**

After I got paid, I went on my holiday day to get food for my children from Adonis Street. During my return and to shorten my way, I passed the governorate road. There was a security detachment that belongs to the military security, and they stopped me and asked for my ID card. They asked me about my relationship with my husband's family "Mehmandar," so I told them that my husband is from this family, then they asked me about my husband, and I answered that I didn't know anything about him. I was told that he was in the political security branch, and as usual they told me: "We want to ask you some questions." and took me to the military security on February the seventeenth, 2014.

One of the detainees searched me after taking off my clothes. On the second day, they took me to the investigation room. I saw my brother in law in the investigator office who stayed in his office for about an hour. After his departure, they brought me in. The investigator asked me: "Did you participate in the demonstrations?" so I denied, then he asked me what I was doing in liberated areas? I denied visiting it. So he told me: "confess about the mission you went out for?" and I continued denying, and suddenly he picked up a telephone and made me listen to a recorded conversation between my husband and me while I was in my family's house due to the problems with my husband and me leaving the house. My family had a home in Anadan area. The recording between him and me was at the time we made up, and he was saying to me: "come on, come back home," I answered "I can't go down now, be patient until they finish." I said this last sentence because in that period ISIS entered Anadan and committed a massacre of two hundred people, during it no one dared to leave his home, and I couldn't explain to my husband what was happening, so I shortened the conversation by two words, but the investigator and the security forces interpreted it as they liked, and started asking me successive questions: "What were you doing, what was going to end, what information did you provide them with, what is your role?"

And this record which was recorded by my brother in law is the one that prove the charges against my husband and me. And for the security it was the proof that there was an agreement between my husband and me. They refused to believe what I said. They took me down and started beating me, and another investigator they called him "Abu Zaloumeh" (May God take him) took my case. He called me after he "blindfolded me" and asked me to walk forward while he was behind me until I hit a wall. I felt something strange, and he was directly behind me, so I turned to him unconsciously and lifted the blindfold from my eyes. So he said to me aggressively: "Why did you turn? Put the blindfold back," and hit me until I fell on the floor, and he started beating me severely, only because I turned towards him. Then he started investigating me, saying: "what were you doing in Anadan?" so I told him I was at my parents' house because of a family matter, but he wasn't convinced. He told me that my name was written on a social media page called "Aleppo Today" under the title "The disappearance of Lula, the warrior," and I replied that I didn't see anything, and he began to threaten me with execution and said to me: "If you don't answer I will send you behind the sun." And again they began to torture me with electricity and crucifixion until my fingers, and the detainee's fingers were turning blue from the long period of the crucifixion. After that, the jailer used to lit the fire with a lighter and touch our fingers with it; the place of blood retention, to make it more painful. This painful method of torture was also used on men. And after hours of the long crucifixion and burning the tips of the feet while you are crucified, you don't know the kind of pain that you feel, is it a fire that burns the tips of your fingers or is it ice.

I stayed for almost a month, and during it I confessed it that I protested with individual motive, but I did not confess the names of my girlfriends who I protested with, as for providing information charge I didn't confess anything.

Food in military security was better than that in criminal security, but of course, but the quality remains bad. A month later, at six o'clock in the morning, I heard someone shouting with my name to be transferred to Palestine branch. Of course, they were telling us that we will go home, but I felt that it was not true.

My brother in law hated me when I refused to register my daughter on his name. He recommended security to torture me. Even though the Mehmandar family is well-known, but the family of, my mother and her siblings, are known in Aleppo as Shabiha. She was ostracized by her husband's family because of her attitude and behavior. My father in law died when my husband was thirteen years old, where her son in law called; A.J, was unleashed in Aleppo since he was the personal bodyguard of colonel Jawad, who was in charge of Aleppo. And her other son in law, was a Shabih and he was the one who wrote the report against me and he used to work in air conditioners and installing air conditioners for Shabiha, he bought a house and a car as a result of his work in writing reports against people, and my husband's nephews, were volunteers in the popular committees, one of them was a military officer and volunteered in the committees.

I knew later that the person who wrote a report in my husband and colleagues at work was one of Baath Brigades in the train station, where the political security arrested them, some of them died in prison, and some of them were released. I wanted to meet one of those who were released to ask about my husband. Mr. Ramez knew about it and invited me to his office, and asked me about the reason of meeting with him I told him that I want to know if he met my husband in detention to make sure that he's fine, so he told me that I can meet the man in his office tomorrow morning, but in his office exclusively. The next day I met with him. Ramez and left us in the room, but I was sure, that he told him what to say to me, and I asked him if he had seen my husband, he said, yes, so I asked him about his health and the case they are investigating him with. He told me that my husband was fine, but he didn't know anything about the investigation and didn't give me any information. I was certain that Ramez prevented him from giving me any information, but I later knew from a friend of my father that this "detainee" left his job and went to his village in Anadan, which is liberated from the regime because he knew that they will re-arrest him again. He told him that my husband is tortured every Friday and whenever he is returned to his cell he is bleeding, his mind is almost gone, unable to concentrate, and he was peeing on himself. He said that his health condition is severely degraded. None of us knew what was he interrogated for, I collapsed when I heard this.

The story of my arrest affected my husband's because when I was arrested from my house, my mobile phone and two additional sim cards remained with him. When he was arrested, they took my phone and the two sim cards which included phone numbers and some videos of the demonstrations. And I think this effected his investigation or at least proved that he knew my activity in demonstrations. Yet they didn't connect between the investigation with me and my arrest and the investigation with him and his arrest.

### **The way to Palestine Branch**

Before we left the military security, they took me to the bathroom with another woman, "al-Hajja," who was about forty-five years old. They arrested her with her son while she was in the prayer cloths. They tied our hands with plastic handcuffs and held them tightly on our wrists. We left the military security and in front of us about sixty men with their hands tied behind their backs with plastic handcuffs, and as we entered the bus, al-Hajja asked me: "Where will they take us?" I answered her: "it seems to

Damascus" she was terrified from the idea, but she became happy when she saw her son with the men who were deported with us. He was a student in the third year in medicine, and she refused to leave him when he was arrested, so they arrested her with him and accused her of covering up him. They accused her son of communicating with a defected officer.

In the bus they used to tell us very bad words, and they asked us not to raise our heads, and with us was a young man with asthma who needed a spray, and the agents were beating him all the time without compassion, so he said to them, "please, I am the only child I want to return to my mother healthy," and despite my suffering, but whenever I saw the sufferings of other people I asked myself should I be sad for my situation or grieve them, "it breaks the heart."

We arrived at the military security in Hama. They checked us in as if we were deposits, and we stayed for about two hours. They took me to the solitary cell which was one square meter with a toilet inside. There were two detainees inside of it, one of them was seventeen years old. She was in the military security for twenty days. Her condition was severely bad, and her torture she experienced was very brute and one cannot be described. Her clothes were ripped out, and rape marks were obvious on her body, scratches and wounds, and she was bleeding. She was raped from both sides by "Lakhdar Brahimi" and lost her virginity. She told me that the person who tortured her told her that he feels disgusting to rape her by his male organ, the girl was engaged to a guy and left him "broke the engagement," then her former fiancée joined the FSA, so the regime arrested her from Hama and accused her of being still in contact with him and that she was practicing Jihad for marriage. Of course, this accusation, which is the Jihad of marriage, they accused most of the detainees with including me, even old women didn't get rid of this charge, "this is the charge is a must,"

I didn't ask the girl about her name because her situation was so bad that even her parents didn't know anything about her after her arrest. The girl was aware that she became a disgrace to her family and that they will kill her after her release. She used to say, "I am dead any way here or outside detention" When I saw her, I was terrified, and my color turned yellow, my concentration became less and I was afraid of being tortured like her. Even "al-Hajja" was afraid, during the hours I spent in the military security in Hama I was interested in asking the girl about the investigation way with her. All the investigations with her she was naked, and her torture was by raping her with all torture tools. And she was the only case I saw in many security branches that was tortured this way. I know that there was raping but I haven't seen anything in this brutal way. Her nipples were bleeding because they were pulling her with something like tweezers, even she didn't know with what they were pulled. They didn't beat her but tortured her from her private parts. I was also told from a detainee I met at the Palestine branch, that she was tortured similarly by the fourth division. I am not surprised because, in the fourth division in Damascus, there are many rape cases.

Two hours later, they took me and "al-Hajja" to Hama's criminal security. They put us in a room where five girls were accused of various charges, including embezzlement, murder, and robbery, and none of them was accused of political charges. We stayed there as deposits for one night. The next morning, they took us from Hama to Homs, and Hama patrol handled us, which treated us in a very dirty way. All the way soldiers were abusing us verbally, harassing us, and when one of us screams, she was slapped

immediately. They started harassing a young woman who was with us and then moved to harass me. We had no right to object on their dirty behavior. They were telling us: "you have no right to speak, you are terrorists, is it not enough that committed Jihad of marriage, this woman with you is wearing prayer clothes. Is this the clothes you wear during sex?" "al-Hajja" was crying because of what she was hearing and seeing, they put their hands on the sensitive places in our bodies, one of them put his hands on one of the girls' boobs and said to his colleague: "come see this her boobs are bigger than the girl with you." Their rudeness was terrifying. We couldn't stop them. They were sure that no one will punish them for any violations. The Hama patrol was the worst patrol I ever saw, they kept doing this until we reached Homs prison.

We arrived in Homs, and they put us in a branch that was called al-Baloony. Then Homs patrol took us to Homs Central Prison. We stayed there for five days. And they took us daily to the military police in Homs until the order came to transfer us; "al-Hajja" and me to Palestine Branch in Damascus. I thanked God that it was "al-Hajja" and me together since we kept each other company.

We rode the bus, and it looked like the vehicle that carries sheep. We had on the bus with us the men who were transferred with us from Aleppo, and they were about sixty men. They put us in a place that looked like a small single room, and "al-Hajja" was anxious to see her son and talk to him, and she asked the soldier to help her who was from Idlib and sympathized with her, and brought her son. She saw him from behind the iron barrier and was in content. Every situation I encountered was more touching than before. Both were crying; she was crying and praying for him, and he was crying and blaming himself for the situation he put his mother in, was broken for her.

### **Palestine Branch**

We arrived at the Palestine branch in Damascus. They first took the men down, they were tied in one metal chain, naked only wearing underwear. Their ages were between fourteen and seventy years old. The cuffs were in our wrists but they didn't blindfold us. I looked up and I saw a sign written on it "who enters is missing, and who is released is newborn" so I knew that I am in Palestine branch. In fact, I didn't know my transfer destination before I saw the sign. I said to "al-Hajja", "we are in Palestine branch, look at the phrase." She said to me, "Do not say it! We will never go out; this is the worst branch."

I was really scared of this branch. We put our belongings and went to the room up, there were around nine rooms, and inside each room thirty-two girl, the jailor put me in one of them. The room was very narrow, and I saw a girl with white eyes and a very yellowish face. I said to myself, "She will definitely die." I asked the girls about her story, so they told me that she is sick, and I started asking each of them about the period of her presence in this branch. Their answers ranged from six months to nine months, without being investigated or even asked about their names! So I said to myself, "that's it we're over."

There was a surveillance camera in the room watching us 24/7. We were allowed to go to the bathroom three times a day at specific times, at seven in the morning, at six in the evening and at ten in the evening. There was a bucket in the room as well, sometimes we had to use it, and due to bad quality of the food we were sometimes

eating. Sometimes we had constipations, and other times we suddenly have diarrhea. They won't open the door no matter how much we knock, so we use the bucket, grabbing blankets to cover each other from being seen on the camera. Sometimes we don't have water to clean ourselves, so we stay dirty until then we are allowed to go out to bathrooms, where we clean the bucket and fill the empty water bottles to clean ourselves after using the bucket. We didn't have "loofah" and soap. Only those who have money within their belongings can buy from the small shop, which contained a lice shampoo "Sinan," sanitary pad, thyme, sugar, and jam only. Each detainee that has money on her and upon her arrival would buy soap and shampoo and distribute them to the girls.

We found inside the sleeping blankets small white worms, such as bulgur seeds, which is the body worm, so we became certain that there were rotting bodies in the branch. This was the second time I saw this type of worm. I saw it once out of a dead and decayed cat. As a result of increasing germs and microbes in the branch cholera spread, and the sick girl I saw when I entered the cell had cholera, but the women were not aware. The girl had severe diarrhea, fever, and lost her memory. On the second day, the infection moved to the girl who was sitting next to her, and on the third day the same, where all detainees have the same symptoms, and the disease continued to spread until the number of infected women in our room reached seven. The epidemic spread in the neighboring rooms as well. We exchanged messages between with the girls in the neighboring rooms by writing on the bathroom wall behind the door using pieces of tin. In this way we knew that the disease spread in the branch, one of the detainees was infected with cholera and her health became very bad. She was detained in the branch a year ago, and was called to be investigated again a year later. Instead of starting her investigation, the detective started beating her with "Lakhdar Brahimi" We heard her scream, and when they brought her back to the cell, her whole body was blue from the beating, her health condition worsened, and lost consciousness, and we started to scream and tell them that she lost her consciousness. After the doctor's arrival they learned that cholera is spreading and started to hand serum bags for the patients and give them medicine. Of course not because of fearing for us, but fearing for themselves.

We used to see twenty to thirty empty bags of serum in the bathroom. Thank God, the girls recovered except for that sick detainee I saw when I entered the cell, she lost her memory. She was a teacher from Deir ez-Zur and she was released from detention two months after I entered. Where she stayed for seven months, I don't know she went to her home or was transferred to another branch, but I didn't see her in Adra prison.

There were men were dying under torture. I remember hearing someone's voice while dying. They were beating him, screaming and hitting his head against the ground. The man was shouting, "Oh God." Suddenly we heard the voice of the man snoring, then he stopped talking, we were silent in order to hear what's was going on, where the interrogator said: "come to take him, he died" another interrogator came and had a fight with the one who was beating the man. We didn't understand what the fight was about, but the branch remained calm without torture for three days after the death of the man. Later, the beatings and torture returned as before.

Every time we came out of our cell, we saw blood on the floor and the walls. We smelled blood. The investigation with men was very tough. Some of the girls were

tortured, but not like the men, because most of the girls were transferred from one branch to another in a formal way. Therefore, they won't be investigated like the rest of the branches or the branch that made the arrest.

I stayed in the Palestine branch for three months. Investigated once, and two days later, I was released in June 2014. I was not tortured in this branch, the investigation with me was formal, and they didn't blindfold me.

The investigator started yelling and told me: "Walk in front of me, you whore." I don't know from where my power came to reply to him, because this word he said to me is offensive and I am ashamed to repeat it. I told him: "enough with the insults, we are fed-up with insults, come beat me and get on with it. It is not necessary to say these words to me" so he sat on chair and shut up, then he asked me about my participation in demonstrations, I answered: "Yes, I participated," because I had previously admitted this, and I denied his question regarding providing the FSA with information. He asked me if my husband was armed. I replied: "No," then asked me about the duration of my stay in the branch, I told him: "three months," and asked me to return to my room.

I returned to my room shocked by the investigator, and when the girls asked me why I was shocked, I told them that the investigation with me was very simple and formal and that the investigator didn't beat me, and when I answered him after he told me a big and bad word, he returned to his chair. They asked me to describe him and told me that he was the only investigator in Palestine branch, who doesn't torture the detainees and formally investigates them and often releases them from the branch, and they added: "it's about two days and you will be released from the branch." He was a young man around twenty-five years old, and overall, his face was comfortable.

Two days later, I finger stamped and left the branch with three girls. They took us to a branch in Kafar Sousah area as a deposit, and on the second day, they took us to Adra prison.

### **Adra prison**

In Adra, the prison was the biggest shock to me because that I saw girls who were transferred from Palestine branch three months ago and were not yet referred to the judge. We thought they went to their homes and we didn't imagine that they were still in Adra prison. One of them told me: "you stay here for three, four or even five months to be referred to the judge, it's about luck" During which something called amnesty was issued, and because of it twenty girls were released. And of course no girl was enlisted in any settlement by coincidence or as they say "those who haven't stained their hands with blood," the girl who gets out either paid money for whoever responsible of the settlement or her "intermediary" important, it doesn't matter what is her charge, but the important thing is that she paid money.

After this amnesty, transfer to judges started. And girls stopped waiting for months without transfer, and after seventeen days in Adra prison, I was transferred to the judge.

In the courtroom there was a one square meter room, under the stairs where girls wait for the judge summon them. The judge (fifth judge) I will appear in front was called (Kh.H) And she is known for her cruelty and meanness, and when I saw her name I got very scared because she has no mercy, and says to everyone; "suspension" even if the person is innocent, and then I knew that I was "suspension" and I denied all the



charges. The judge decided to suspend me with gloating in her eyes and a smile on her face. She was happy while writing the word suspension. I wanted to cry, but when I saw the gloating in her eyes I didn't, and I said to her: "Thank you," and left.

I went back to Adra, and they transferred me from the fifth ward which was for deposit to the fourth ward which was for suspension. It was called the ward of the dead, because whoever enters will not get out before years. I was afraid when entering the room because none of who I knew was there, I saw an old woman in her sixties who was in prison for ten years, from before the events in Syria, and she was accused of dealing with the Israeli intelligence service, her name was M.N. She was from Homs. I was stunned by the time she spent in detention. I said to myself: "So I will stay there until I become old." I ask the detainees about years they spent in prison, one of them since 2013, and the other since 2012.

I think any detainee will be forgotten in prison, if her family did not care and tried to get her out. One of them is called B.M, she is from Latakia. Thank God she is out now, but after spending five years in Adra prison. She was pregnant when arrested and after giving birth her daughter was ill and died because she needed oxygen and no one aided her. The mother suffered from mental disorder becoming nice sometimes and violent in other times which drove other detainees away from her.

During the presidential elections in June 2014, they brought us a box to vote for Bashar al-Assad! How do we vote for him and we are political detainees! It was the worst day for us. We were forced to vote, and after voting, we burst into tears. After three detainees refused to vote for him, we heard the voice of the colonel, M.B, saying: "take these whores down to the solitary cell, and they are not allowed to eat or drink." They put each one of them in a cell without food and drink, and when they came out they were in a very bad condition "yellowish in color because they were hungry and thirsty," they were beaten, and forced to vote for Bashar. They stayed ill on the mattress for a month.

### **Political Security Branch**

I was released from Adra prison on December 10, 2014, and on the day of my release, the Colonel told me that there was a telegram to transfer me to the political security, where I met my husband, and he confessed under the torture that I participated in demonstrations and also admitted that I leaked information, participated in planning, and arming.

The political branch was the worst branch I had ever been through, and all I went through during my detention was nothing like this branch. Since I came to this branch, they greeted me with ugly words. They said: "They got us a new whore, come over let's fuck her." Then they took me to the solitary cell for searching, one of the detainees came to search me, I was searched like the previous time, naked, then they took me to the cell. After a while, they summoned me for investigation. I was expecting to meet my husband because he was arrested by them.

I tried to remember every word I said during my previous sessions so that my statements wouldn't be different. If any word differed with one letter, my file will be changed, and their methods will change, and they will interrogate me from scratch.

The investigation room was under the ground, and they called it "the slaughterhouse." I was blindfolded. I knew from the investigator that the head of the branch was present during the investigation and wants to hear my statement, what are the charges I was accused with at the air force branch where my first arrest was. The investigator said to me "Talk," I told them I didn't participate, and I did nothing, so the head of the branch asked me: "was your husband armed?" I answered them no. he told me: "We have different information." He told me to stand aside. Adding, "I don't want to hear your voice." And then he lifted my blindfold and brought my husband, and he was blindfolded. To be honest without his voice I wouldn't know that it was him, before he was 175 cm tall, he wasn't thin, and his shoulders were wider. But I saw him as a skeleton, his body was full of bleeding wounds, and his skin color was a mix of green, red and blue, as for his head it was very, very big and swollen. The investigator asked him: "were you armed?" My husband replied, "Yes, I was armed." He asked him, "Where were you armed?" He replied: "in Tall Suwsein, and I was at the checkpoint." Knowing that my husband's sight was very weak and he cannot see anything without using his eyeglasses, and he doesn't see clearly when he puts them on. So how can he carry a weapon and fire with it! This was a good point to use in defending him. The investigator asked him, "What was your wife doing?" He replied: "She was going out in demonstrations and provide the FSA with information, and she incited me to be armed." The head of the branch looked at me and said: "Lula what do you think?" so my husband knew I was there, I screamed: "My husband is a liar, my husband is a state employee, and if he wanted to go to the armed areas he needs twelve hours to get there and the same for his return, and he never misses a working day."

And you are the state, and you can verify my words, my husband's sight is very weak, and now he is not putting his glasses so he can't see you or me, and he sees only shadows when he wears them. My answer was very convincing, and when my husband found me daring and talking and defending him, he said to him, "I swear Sir, my wife's statement is right, my wife and me did nothing, and in Aleppo prison they beat me only on my head" and change his statements, and truly the hitting marks were obvious on his head. Unfortunately, they had no ethics and used the dirty and abusive method of pressure on me and my husband through me. They started beating him and started harassing me where they took off my clothes, and one of them raped me in front of him, while two agents were holding me. My husband couldn't handle what he saw, so he fell, and he didn't say a word, I thought that he lost consciousness and I didn't think that he died at the moment. They carried him and took him out of the room, and I wore my clothes and was sent back to the solitary cell.

On the second day, the head of the branch asked me, "Admit and don't carry the case alone, your husband is dead, admit that he was armed." I didn't believe that my husband died and I said to him, "My husband was not armed on any day, and I will not lie, and if he admitted it's his choice," and then the same torture methods came back and they started crucifying and electrifying me. On every investigation, they repeated the same questions, and I was wondering: "Why didn't they get me back with my husband, is he really dead! Or they want to play me?" I was in a state of confusion, what is done, is done, so I stuck to my statement, and if they wanted to kill me it then is fine. I stayed there for two months and didn't know anything about my husband.

### **Adra prison again**

In February 2015, I returned to Adra prison, and my friends were shocked when I returned to the prison again. They were frustrated by the whirlpool which we were in, and the impossibility to leave. I stayed there for seventeen days and then I was transferred to the second judge again who was called: A.J, and he decided to suspend me again. Again, my charges were participation in the demonstrations, information leaking, and covering for crime, which means: "I did not tell on my husband." Then they put me in the suspension ward in Adra prison. After about seven months, I was transferred to the criminal court, and every month I appeared before the court.

In this period, I had a blood infection and the cause was unidentified. At first they thought I had a stroke. My temperature was always high, and one time, my temperature reached forty degrees and I passed out. I couldn't stand up and was always lying. I stayed like this for two months. During I was able to stand only with the help of my friends. They took me to the bathroom when I needed. The colonel in prison prevented me from medication until my friends informed a doctor through their families, and he prescribed a medicine for me, which was smuggled during visitations, thank God I started to improve, and I was able to stand and walk. But the side effects are still with me so far. I suffer from severe headaches that make me pass out for three days if I don't take a painkiller. No one knows the cause of this pain, but doctors say it is psychological.

I was released from Adra Prison on December 16, 2016. I remained under trial, attended two sessions, and on the third, the judge sentenced me to sixteen years in prison. I had a month to surrender myself or to appeal, but I preferred to go to Idlib.

### **After my release**

After my release from Adra prison there was no one waiting for me. I didn't know where to go, I didn't know the roads of Damascus and no one dared to allow me to make a phone call after seeing me getting out of prison until one of the soldiers approached me and asked me if I wanted anything. I was afraid so I stepped back, then he said to me: "if you want to make a call, take my phone" I took his phone and called a friend of mine who was with me in prison and released before me and told her that I am released. I asked her to come to take me from the Mazzeh area where I was. My friend was very happy and told me that she will come right away. I know the nature of soldiers, and I know that he didn't give me his phone for no reason, so I gave him five hundred SP for lending me his phone and to stop him from asking me anything else, and waited until my friend came and took me to her house, where I stayed for two days.

I wanted to go back to my children, and I started to think about the clashes and all the possibilities with my family in law. I used to talk to my children by telephone. My mother's in law reaction was very harsh when I was released, and her son wasn't. She told me, "Ask about your husband, Ahmed." Even though she knew that he died and they received his ID card from the military police in Qaboun area. But I didn't know that at the time and I was in doubt and needed a way to be sure while it was difficult for me to ask about him officially since they will arrest me again.

I was still on trial, afraid to return to Aleppo because the regime regained control of the area. Afraid of being arrested again, I stayed in Damascus for another two months. I

started going to a day-job at a toy shop, and at night I worked to tend a woman with hemiplegia. I look after her and sleep in her room, I used to sleep only two hours per day, and my goal was to save enough money to pay for my transportation back to my children.

When I went to Aleppo, I decided to go to my family in law in a friendly way, show that I had no hard feelings against them, and that my children will live between us and that they can see them whenever they wanted.

I headed to the workplace of Mohammad "my brother in law," who was surprised when he saw me, and I said to him: "I miss my children, and I want to see them" he answered me aggressively "No children for you here!" I replied, "I am their mother, and I have the right to see them." He said to me, "Go and complaint against us," so I left him and walked away, and started to think, if they found out my weakness points they will become tougher on me, but if I show them toughness and compromise a little it will be better for me. So I called my mother in law and said to her what Mohammad told me, and I added: "I don't want any problems, but if you want, then it's okay with me" but she said, "Go to the courts."

My family in law tried to incite my eldest son against me. He was fifteen years old at the time, and they told him that they will sue me. Asking him to testify against me that I don't have manners, they wanted to challenge my manners. It was impossible for my son to do what they asked, because when I arrived in Aleppo, he went out to look for me, which forced them to back off from inciting him against me, also, forcing my mother in law to call me and invite me to see my children.

I went to them and kissed my mother in law and her hand, I greeted to my brother in law as if nothing had happened. I told them that I will assign a lawyer to ask about my husband Ahmed, but I want my family book, but my mother in law said: "It is lost." She refused to give me the book. I told her: "I will go to Damascus and I want to take my children with me" but she refused saying: "Go alone" so I told her that I want to take them with me to entertain them, and I will definitely return to Aleppo and live with them and my children. Because I cannot raise them alone. So she allowed me to only take my little son Saad.

I went with my son to Damascus and assigned a lawyer who was asked about my husband. He assured me that he died and that his family took his ID card. I still had a hearing to attend at the terrorism court. In the first and second sessions, my appearance before the judge was not more than five minutes, where the judge states charges against me, and I deny them, then my case is postponed. The sentence was issued in March 2017, after it, I couldn't return to Aleppo because I will be arrested at the checkpoints. So I decided to go to Idlib.

My friend in Lebanon gave me money, and gave me a driver's number, who I called and agreed on a specific date to travel, but he didn't call me again. I called him again, and we agreed to meet at two o'clock in the morning so we won't talk on the phone. My son and I went and waited for him in the Dummar project area, and he asked me about my situation, and he said: "You cannot pass through checkpoints at all." Adding, "I will take you today at five o'clock in the morning, but I asked him to wait for two days to get the money from my friend in order to pay him, and he replied: "I don't

need a lira from you, prepare yourself and your son and we will meet in the same place at five in the morning, and when you arrive Idlib send me the money."

The driver arrived on time, and I got into the car, and after a while he asked me to get off and wait until he brings a young man from his house to go with us. He was afraid of me and didn't want me to know where the young man lived. I was also afraid from him, so I left with my son from the place he dropped us to a sub-street corner in case of any surprise, so I can walk in another direction, and I waited. He called me when he didn't find me, and I went to him when I saw him, and I felt comfortable. He knew I was scared. I still remember this incident and laugh.

We went to Idlib, and with us three young men in the car, one fled from military service and the other defected from the army. Thank God I arrived to Idlib. I rented a house using the money my friend sent me, and I started looking for a job. I worked in a bridal preparation hall and communicated with my eldest son, who wanted to come to me. I agreed with a driver and asked my son to come with his siblings. And so he told his grandmother that he will go with his sister to help with distribute aid to orphans, so she agreed, but he didn't dare to bring my youngest child because he was afraid of the checkpoints and a young boy with two children will draw their attention. Until now my son regrets leaving his younger sister there, especially as there is no way for us to bring her. She stayed with my brother in law Mohammad. This is he wanted but thank God my daughter knows that I am her mother and she knows her father and is aware that my brother in law is not her father. Because her siblings used to show her pictures of her father and me, even though their uncle used to beat them when he knew.

I stayed for three months in Kafr Nabl in Idlib, where I worked in Radio Fresh and then traveled to Turkey in October 2017. Although life in Kafr Nabl was wonderful, I was feared for my children from the intense shelling, also because, they drooped school when they were at their grandparent's house. When I traveled to Turkey, I admitted them to the school called "Orphans Village." Despite their absence from school, they are doing very good now. And my oldest son doesn't want to continue his studies. During the last period since my husband's and my detention, he was responsible for his siblings. He wants to take responsibility with me and now works in a sewing workshop, and I work in herbal medicine shop.

During my first detention, my personality didn't change, and I wasn't affected. I was optimistic and active. I worked as an employee in Adra prison and got a salary from the prisoners' association. I used to clean the ward, and they also assigned me as the room supervisor. In the same time, I was exercising training the girls with me. From the first time I entered Adra prison, I concentrated on setups and pushups, so that I can endure if they hit me on my stomach, I also know how to take a hit, I also used to run, and the purpose was to discharge the energy, and of course I only played inside the room away from the cameras in the yard of Adra prison. But now I live for my children's future, I have no future.

### **Relationship with family and society**

After my release from the detention and going to Aleppo, I saw my family only once during a condolence of a young man from the family. I agreed with my mother to meet somewhere close to the condolence place. We stood opposite to each other, but I

didn't notice or see her, and she didn't recognize me until my son said: "is this grandma?" I turned towards her, and at the same time she looked at me, I ran to her and hugged, and kissed her, it was a very hard situation. I was happy when I saw her and I was hurt because she didn't know me and didn't know my children. I went to the place of condolence, and I saw my father, then I went into women's room and there were my relatives and I didn't know many of them. Then I asked my mother if she wanted to spend the night with me since I was staying in a hotel, and she agreed. We didn't sleep until morning, she kept asking me, but I didn't tell her everything that happened to me during the three years of my arrest not to make her sadder. But to be frank, my parents didn't support me and didn't ask about my children because of their fear from my family in law.

After the regime regained Aleppo and Salaheddine area exclusively, some people moved to Idlib, others remained in their homes. My mother in law wrote reports to the security about some of those who remained, and they were arrested. My mother in law and my brothers in law were informants officially, she used to send her children to "clean up" people's empty houses, they didn't spare anything in the houses, and my children told me about it.

When my former detainee friend, found that my situation is becoming more difficult, she hired a lawyer for me, especially when there was news on the Internet that they will execute me with other five detainees, and next to my name it was mentioned that I was transferred to the field court. Unfortunately, these is fake news which made everything worst because it drove the attention on us more. And when she heard the news I was in Adra prison, and expected to be returned to security branches to investigate with me, and we didn't know who published this news.

My relationship with my female friends whom I knew before my arrest ended because they were residents in areas controlled by the regime and they didn't contact me anymore. But I became friends that are political detainees, and I am proud of them. We were with each other in good and bad days, and I met them in Idlib and Turkey, and we still communicate, working together as one hand to defend our cause, the detainees cause, to let the world hear their voices, and we have to deliver their voices and tell our story and experience during detention because it resembles many stories of detainees.

The society, in all, changed our detention to scars on our bodies, staying with us wherever we go. The community's perspective is silly, and for them being detained by the regime means that; female detainees were exposed to everything, and if the person is bad he will use the female detainee for his personal interests, meaning "for his sexual interests" saying: "you were detained by the regime, you were raped, so why I have no right to do whatever I want with you?" And the person who wants to marry, he doesn't want to marry to a former detainee, although he may have been previously detained, and this thing happened with our friend, after she met someone who's looking for a wife, he refused to marry her and said to her "All the world knows you are were detained, I can believe that nothing happened with you, but society will not believe it." Knowing that nothing happened with her inside the detention.

My arrest affected my father and almost hurt him in his work, but he told his colleagues at work and other people that he is not asking about his daughter and that he had

nothing to do with her. Even when I met my family, no one knew about it, and till now, everyone knows that my family has discharged me for their safety and security.

My arrest affected my older brother, and he considers me dead it also got to my sister's husband, who prevented her from talking to me so I won't affect the reputation of his daughters. I suffer from this situation, I have no contact with my siblings, this hurts me a lot, sometimes I excuse them, and sometimes I can't. My brother or his wife could have been arrested and we were subjected to it, so they should understand my situation and that what happened to me was destined, so they shouldn't make it harsher on me. When a detainee is released, she's weak and must start her life from scratch, and if her family weren't aware she might lose her manners and people will manipulate her.

In Turkey, for example, when they find a single former detainee with no one by her side, they try to make her work by prostitution, or implicate her in political issues by people who are neither opposed nor pro-regime, but people who benefit from both sides. If a former detainee is not supported she will be lost.

### **Relationship with the street**

For me, street became a forest. I only walk to work, I don't have to turn to the other side, and any street for me is the other side. I even don't look at shops names. The street today differed from the street I was demonstrating and shouting for freedom in, we were one people and one hand at the time, and we were protesting for a cause, but now there are no demonstrations and hearts are no longer pure. Those who left Syria didn't experience what we lived, and their thinking is limited only to building their lives and making money, even if it's on behalf of any helpless or a very vulnerable person. What is important for them is to rise and be seen, and the others are falling down. I speak specifically about people who are currently in Turkey and who didn't participate in the revolution, didn't suffer from war and left Syria at the beginning of the revolution with their money.

### **Challenges**

The most important challenge that I face right now is society, being a former detainee, appearing on media with my face and talking about detention. I appeared on several satellite channels, for example, Al-Jazeera, where I talked about detention in general and about detainees who were absent in prison. Sometimes, I hear from some of the women, "Um Saad, is talking on television," and the eyes of the society were on me, especially since I live in a small town called "Reyhanlı" where everyone knows each other. Some of them support what I do, and some tells me: "you are a woman, no need for these talks, who will hear you, as if you are a journalist," It is true I am a woman but I can I convey many voices, and I won't let anyone's opinion affect.

Before my arrest, I was a normal housewife, and I had nothing to do but to take care of my children and my house. But since I was young, I was interested in learning about political matters, especially the massacres committed by Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s, but I didn't dare to talk about them because my mother always silenced me. Even

when I grew up, I kept asking about what happened in that period. Everyone speaks and says, "This is what happened in the eighties." Without any detailed explanation for our generation. Unfortunately, what happened in the eighties was devastating to Syria and after the uprising, the generations that started the demonstrations began to talk about that period, where some people lost a mother, father or a relative. People started talking about the women who were accused of affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood and disappeared by the regime. I also met a detainee in one of the detention centers, who told me that when she was fifteen years old she was arrested and accused of affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. The regime is the one who planted injustice and the revolution was its result and what was established by al-Assad the father was a faulty foundation. Even if the revolution is dead now, it will rise again on the hands of the next generation, because loss and injustice now are greater than in the eighties.

### **Relationship with civil society organizations**

I have been offered psychosocial support sessions from an organization but my time is very tight and divided between my children and my work, which starts from nine thirty in the morning and ends at six in the afternoon.

Previously, I volunteered with one of the organizations which works on detainees. I was responsible for detainees located in Idlib. I was tasked to document names, medical conditions, dates of detention, and other information. In the second month of my work we asked them to help them secure job opportunities. Some were educated, and some are university graduates, but there were no job opportunities for them, so how are they going live with their children!

The organization could have benefited from them at work. At the same time, work will be a psychological support to them, but they didn't help them with anything, not even aid, and all they gave was false promises. I didn't understand on what reason they requested the names of detainees and renewal of their data without benefiting them. The request to renew their data means that the organization is benefiting, as if we were sources of profit for them. Rights of the former female detainees are lost, and even those who are still in detention, no one is working or screaming for them. And if we detainees did not appear on media one would have known us or remembered our cause. This is my goal from documenting my testimony, and my story is one of thousands. Which is a small message about the horrors in detention centers.

### **Last word**

International trials are the solution to hold all perpetrators in Syria accountable. I definitely I will file a lawsuit against the criminals who committed violations against me and other detainees. Our right as survivors from detention, is received by punishing them.

Male and female detainees are the only ones who deserve help because they paid a great deal, and who lives now in detention wishes to die every day and every moment, losing hope of release. This is what happened to me during my detention and I used to say to myself: "oh God please let me die but don't leave me in detention."



For example, when I was in Adra, and the Free Syrian Army besieged the prison, there was shelling, and two shells landed in the courtyard of the prison, and if we were out we would have been dead. Despite the shelling, few of us were afraid, those who knew that they will be released from prison soon and that their case was very small, as for the rest we didn't care whether we lived or died.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interview between the writer and Lula Aga via WhatsApp, on Feb 09, 2019. Duration of the interview: 3 hours and 40 minutes.



Amira<sup>7</sup>\*

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<sup>7</sup> - Amira Fuad Tayyar, interview with the author via WhatsApp, on: February 02, 2019, duration: 4.30 hours.  
\*Cover By: Adeeb Al-Hariri



Ajeeb Al-Hariri

My name is Amira Fuad Tayyar from Hama city, born on November 16, 1974. I live now with my daughter in Kayseri in Turkey, I reached grade six in my school. I have three children, one martyred, one detained since 2013 and my daughter.

I have nine siblings, my brother got arrested in 2013 and died under torture in Sednayah prison. We didn't know about his death till my mother visited the prison, where she was given his death certificate from civil affairs, and that was after a whole year from his death. We couldn't know where he was buried till now, my brother was with the revolution and the free Syrian army, and he used to protect women protests.

Since the beginning of the revolution my husband my son and I participated in many peaceful protests in Hama. After the protest of "Million People" some youth started to arm themselves to protect the demonstrations. After that the free Syrian army started taking shape. My fifteen years old son joined them, and when the army started entering Hama city on July 31, 2011, my husband got arrested from his workplace and I know nothing about him until this day.

I am a revolutionary, I aided the injured, assisted soldiers to defect, and provided safe places for them. I volunteered in the Red Crescent in my city, and helped poor families, hid rebels in my house, and took their wives to hospitals to give birth.

I supported the revolution and the FSA, and we weren't militias or Muslims brotherhood. I worked with the rebels from the beginning, and I never regret it, even though I lost my son who died under torture, and lost my husband as well. I didn't abandon the revolution, and did not grieve on loved ones, but it was quite the opposite I was getting stronger and more determined. Some people tried to scare me, by saying: "you are happy now and laughing, you want to take down the regime. But you will cry at the end, and you will regret it," and I used to answer that I will never cry, and until now I wish to go back and fight the regime until it falls.

In 2012, I was arrested for the first time for five hours at the Hama military site. After which my son and I worked with the rebels in northern Syria, then I returned to Hama city and continued my work with the rebels, and three days after my arrest I was detained for hours, then arrested again by State Security on October 22, 2014, from the home of my family located in the Baath district of Hama city, after the regime burned my house, and was transferred me to the military court in Hama on November 01, 2014.

Then I was transferred to the Military Security Branch in Hama, and I stayed there for a month, and then I was transferred to the military police in Homs and I started suffering, torture and beatings. After a week, I was transferred to Branch 215 in Damascus, I was interrogated for a week, then transferred to Branch 229 where I was kept in the solitary cell, which was a toilet, and then I was transferred to the Air Force Intelligence branch.

Torture was by drip, where water drops fall on a piece of metal all the time. I was put in a room full of mirrors, then I was transferred to Branch 555, and in this branch I saw wonders from torture types, either with a hose used for water supply, where they called it "Lakhdar Brahimi," and my worst torture was hearing the sound of men who were under torture.

After a week I was transferred to Branch 235, and during my interrogation they ripped out my fingernails, and tortured me with electricity. All to admit that I'm helping the free Syrian army and that my house was a field hospital, then I was transferred to hospital 601, where I was tied to a bed in way like crucifixion for a week and they call it "Shabeh." Shabeh is kind of torture where prisoner is tied tightly to the bed from his/her hands and legs each one of them aside.

Then I got transferred to Palestine branch, where the officers were shocked that I returned alive, after one week I was left in a small room with six dead men, and I saw a machine inside a room that looks like a meat grinder, where one of the soldiers threaten me that I will end up like a guy they chopped if I don't admit.

I got transferred to Terrorism court, then to Kafar Sousah police station in Damascus, where I stayed for one week, then I was transferred to Adra prison until I was released on January 27, 2015.

I left detention with a broken shoulder, ripped of fingernails, torture marks on my body, and my hands have marks of torture by electricity.

In all security branches, they used the word "whore" as if they are calling us by our names, besides threats of raping our daughters and us.

### **My Son's Arrests**

My son Abdul Fattah Lahlah was arrested for three times and died under torture in Sednayah prison. After his first arrest he was thrown on my doorstep in his underwear, thinking that he's about to die due of torture he was experienced in Branch 215 in Damascus, and that was five months after his detention, his mouth was bleeding heavily, and had bruises on his body caused by the drill like the one used to punch the walls.

He looked horrific, and I have a video documenting his condition. After taking him to a doctor, he told me that he needed surgery since he was suffering from internal bleeding in his head, and was treated.

In the second time, he was arrested for one month by the military security in Hama, in front of Hama military site "al-Dabagha" street while he's going to get "stop search" paper.

In the third arrest they took him with my oldest son who abandoned his military service from my brother's house in "al-Baath" neighborhood, on October 22, 2013, then I got news from some of those released from the Military Security branch in Homs, that he should be released by bribery because his condition is dire, and his testicles are swollen by the impact of torture with electricity. But I did not have the money or anything to sell.

We never heard from him anymore until I was arrested after a year on October 22, 2014. Where he was brought to watch my torture, I was blindfolded, but I recognized him, he was crawling and couldn't stand up on his feet, he just cried while they were torturing me and ripping my fingernails off, in front of his eyes to force me give the names of the leaders whom I used to work with, but I refused to admit.

### **Memories of Crimes in Hama 1982**

Today marks the anniversary of the events of Hama in 1982. I was young, but I still remember many of the crimes the city witnessed, which strengthened us during the revolution. For Example, while accompanying my mother to buy things I witnessed with my own eyes in "al-Jozdan" street how the regime was lining up the men, by putting their chins on the edge of the sidewalk while their bodies were on the ground and then a tank came to run over them one by one. This massacre is well known and recited among people.

I remember clearly that I was with my aunt who went to check on her house in "al-Hadher" area, I saw seven men with long beards burnt on the river shore in Assi Square. On the way back I saw them covered in dirt, I also saw them bringing the martyred in trucks to the cemetery of "Barriyet al-Aasher" which is close to the train station, and throwing them in a pit and pouring acid on them until their dead bodies are melted and then buried in mass graves. In a later stage "al-Rayaheen" school was built over that area.

All these crimes only made us more determined to continue the revolution even my son who was martyred, refused carrying the "personal ID," and he used to destroy it each time he gets a new one. Since it was issued by this regime, and he refuses to have Bashar al-Assad as his president.

My uncle told us that when he was working as a fireman in the civil defense forces, he was asked after he was provided with a Kalashnikov rifle, to enter one of the buildings and opens fire on everybody inside, and they were al-Arnaout family, but he refused and threw the rifle on the floor and started shouting and pretending that he was sick, claiming that he felt a severe abdominal pain, so he won't participate in this crime. But they forced another civilian on killing the family and, "blood was everywhere."

I also remember how my father and grandfather were taken out, thrown on the floor, and how the soldiers stepped on their chests while saying: "you are Muslim brotherhood." Even though my father and grandfather were shaved and had big mustaches, unlike the brotherhood.

### **Memories from the Beginning of the Revolution**

Before the revolution, my husband was working on repairing generators and water pumps. He used to fix some for the military security and knew a man there called "Abu Hafez." He called my husband one morning and told him that Hama city will be raided. There will be Mercedes cars and big buses, to attack and to slaughter al-Aroor family, so be careful.

When I conveyed this information to the rebels they didn't take it seriously. But I stayed awake until after "morning prayers" on the balcony of my house watching the streets. A woman called Wafaa was watching with me, she was highly active in the revolutionary work, and her house was a field hospital. Shortly after her departure, black Mercedes cars and buses arrived, and started to deploy. Dressed in the black uniform of security forces. I hurried to awaken the men and warn them, so they closed a street close to the finance building by burning tires so the security won't enter.

However, the security forces didn't leave until they massacred more than fifteen people from al-Aroor family.

### **Aiding the Wounded**

During my revolutionary activity 2012 - 2014. I used to treating the injured and transporting them to hospitals, especially "al- Hurani" hospital, where they treated the injured for free. I also carried injured men on my shoulders, when the men could not enter the hospital.

I remember an incident that happened with me, when one of the rebels called me, his name (K.B) and he was wanted dead or alive, and told me that there was a young man who had been shot in his stomach, after targeting the car they were driving towards Kafr Zita and he needed help. He took me from al- Hurani hospital to a place of the park, and when I arrived I found several people hiding on the top of one of the buildings. I was surprised to see a thirteen-years-old boy left in a pen for rabbits and pigeons, injured by a bullet that entered from his waist and exited from the other side and he was heavily bleeding. I yelled at them for keeping him here. They answered that they were afraid, so I ordered them to come down from the roof so as not to draw the attention of building's residents.

I remember the weather was very cold, when everybody came down, I asked the young man if he can handle the pain and he said yes, so I carried him on my shoulders and ran seven floors down, and stood on the side of the street stopping passing cars, but no one responded for fear of the boy's bloody clothes. So I starting telling drivers that he is my son and that his wound is from an appendix surgery, where the wound got opened because I asked him to move a hardware for me, until one of the drivers accepted to take him.

I called a man called (Abu Nawaf) who's a rebel veterinarian, who currently lives in the liberated village of Termanin close to the borders. He is still working with the revolution, and told him about the young man's story, so he asked me to take him to al-Hikma hospital, so I headed there where they operated the young man and removed parts from his stomach and intestines that had been damaged , and he survived. But the doctor (N.Sh) reported me for bringing a man wounded by a gunshot, and since then the regime is looking for me, even though I was on the wanted list before but the man who reported me at the time didn't know my mother's name, and made a mistake so my mother's name was Awatef instead of Fatima.

Patrols used to come to my neighborhood, asking about a woman called

"mother of all" or "mother of the rebels," saying that she's a traitor to the country and the president Bashar al-Assad. They even asked me without realizing that I was the one they were looking for, because I used to pretend to love the president, that he was a good man who didn't hurt anyone, cursing whoever is against him. The patrols also searched the houses inch-inch, but we knew about the time of the search when the vegetable car is late due to blocking roads, so we hide the medicine and first aid tools in holes underground we dug earlier.



### First detention 2012

There were a group of rebels hiding in my house, and when I knew that the regime will search the houses that day, I asked them to take their belongings and leave, so they won't get arrested, and I told them: "I will contact you to provide you with information and updates on what is happening in the neighborhood" so they all left.

On that day while I was standing in front of my door to watch I saw a young military man fully equipped. He had an "RPG" launcher, and searched the houses. So I tried to talk to him to get any useful information, and I knew that his name was Muhammad from Daraa city and was brought to Hama to eliminate the armed terrorists and to kill them and arrest the rest of them. I replied, "your people in Daraa are getting arrested and killed and you are coming to Hama instead of defending your family there?" he said that he could not do anything, and I said, "you can defect," so he asked me how, I told him: "no one sees you now, you can hide and defect, and I can direct you to men to help you on this, they can even take you to your family if you want and I will depend on you and trust you." I was able to convince him to defect and guided him to the path of the rebels, so he arrived at the place and joined them with his full equipment.

I returned to watch from my door. Some of the residents of the neighborhood were arrested, and others were spared. Among the detainees was a man called (A.H) who works in producing aluminum doors, he was caught by one of "al-Ajaza" checkpoint named called "Abu Muhammad." I rushed to him and claimed that he is my cousin and swore that he did not join any demonstrations at all in his life. The agent told me that he just wanted to check his ID, so I gently pulled the ID from his hand and give it back to its owner, and assured him that he did nothing, so he gave me a look and left.

Then I stayed in the street for almost ten minutes to make sure they left, and the search is over, so I called the men to inform them. As I walked and while I was on the line, suddenly fifty agents like monsters broke into the street, so I told the men about it, immediately and before ending my words they twisted my arm and took my phone, I was pushed into a car and forced to keep my head down so no one can see me, but I was resisting since my hands were not cuffed, after that they drove around the area twice, and took me to Hama military site in "al-Dabagha" street.

I had five cell phones, a gun, and thirty-five thousand SP, and an astringent. One of the phones was ringing repeatedly in my pocket, I disconnected it, so they won't hear it, since the ring tone was "you Bashar, we will remove you by shoes" which means we will take you down in the power of the shoe. One of the soldiers whispered to take the phone and hide it, so they won't use it as evidence against me. I agreed, and he took it while thanking God in my heart, after a while when changing the soldiers in the car I threw the gun I had under the driver's seat without anyone seeing me.

Then they took me to the military security, were they searched me on the gate, and they asked me about the money I had with me, I answered it's my pocket money, and I won't leave it home to be stolen, so one of the agents put it in his pocket, this amount of money was for buying SIM cards for the rebels. Then they sent me with the bag to the general's office and empty it on his table, so he pointed at it and said: "what are

these things?" I answered I used to go out on demonstrations and continued saying: "we didn't protest to take Bashar down and started chanting (the people wants to overthrow the regime) we only want the regime to fall," so he raised his hand and slapped me several times on my face, and said: "so you admit" I answered: "yes, I used to demonstrate, I can't deny it while I am carrying the revolution flag, and niqab," so he asked me about the niqab, I answered "we wear it so the informants won't recognize us" he answered: "are these your statements?" I said "yes," so he asked me about the ID I had with me, which belonged to an informant who was killed and given to me by lawyer (H.Kh) to buy sim cards under his name. I answered referring to the soldier who saw me throw the trash the night before, that I saw something shining on the ground, so I took it and put it in my bag until I ask about it in the mosque in the morning, but you caught me before I had the chance to. Although I knew they will not believe me, he said to me: "the owner of this ID is armed, and I want you to deliver him," so I have sworn that I don't know him and I found the ID on the floor, so he asked about the medicine? I answered him that my father's leg is severed from the thigh, which is true due to diabetes, and these medicines are for high blood pressure and the shots for infection and tetanus. You can go see my father with your own eyes. Through the investigation I was constantly getting slapped and kicked, then they took me out of the office, and stopped me in the corridor, where I saw one of the neighborhood boys, they poured water over him then shock him with electricity, because he told on me and it was not proven. I yelled at him saying "Shame on you," so the branch general heard me and came out angry and started slapping me and kicking me again, when he noticed the empty gun clip, he said: "what is this?" This means that the gun we found in the car is for you so I denied it and said "do I look like I could carry a gun, and where can I get it? My son works in manufacturing, I found it while was walking, and said to myself that it might be useful to him since I saw metal spring inside of it." They laughed at me when I pretended that I couldn't recognize it, and said: "Didn't your son ever play with a plastic gun before?" I replied: "How do I know that it's real?" but they knew I was lying.

In the meantime, a person called (A.L.Z) who was assigned by (A.A) called them to pay bribes to the regime to release female detainees and he owned a marble cutting factory. Then they took me down to a room with a "plasma TV" and showed me photos for demonstrations, and funerals of martyrs, and started asking me about people in the pictures, so I denied knowing any of them, until they reached a photo I was in, so I claimed that it's a fake picture, and these pictures were taken by informants from inside the demonstrations, then (A.L.Z) paid my bail and promised that I would not go in demonstrations again, with paying bribe of course.

After that they took me from the military security to Hama military site, where I signed a pledge was released, after the military security confiscated the medicine and kept the family book of my wanted brother and my son's military ID which I had with me, and they gave me back the revolution flag and niqab inside the bag, my detention period was five hours.

### The second detention

Three days after my first arrest, I was heading to the Red Crescent. Where the head of the Hama military site with his staff had arrested fifty people from “Bab Qibli” and “al-Wadi.” He told me: Give me your bag and walk in front of me and I replied “I am clean and was released the day before yesterday” but he did not care and took me back to the site of Hama military, and they started beating me (they almost killed me) and then they showed me to the people they arrested and told them that if they confessed that I was the woman who armed their sons and brought them to demonstrations, they would leave immediately. He ordered them to say that, and to repeat what he said, so they did.

Then they throw their ID cards, so they started collecting them then left, but they took me and put me under the sink, where everyone started kicking me.

One of the Red Crescent workers knew about my arrest, so she called (A.L.Z).

While investigating me, one of them said to me: We know that you’re working against us, and we know about what are you doing, you helped injured people, and your home is a field hospital. I denied that, and the reason behind my detention was to get to my son and brother, where they asked me to call them to come to the site to take my brothers family book and my son's military ID, so I called my brother and told him.

Then I got two calls answered by one of the agents, the first one from my son who cursed him and asked him to leave me, and the second call was from one of the rebels who threatened him by saying: if you don't release her we will come and blow up the place. The woman who worked in the Red Crescent came with (A.L.Z) and paid the money, so the site leader asked me to leave, and told me that I should go to “Abi al-Fidaa” street, to one of the factories, where the owner used to work is an informant for them, to collect my ID card.

I actually went out with one informant walking ahead of me called (A.H) who has a shop for cell phones, I wanted to tell my brother and son not to go to the site. The weather was very cold with heavy rain, I took a taxi as fast as I could where the detective lost me.

I went to the carpenter’s market and entered one of the shops, the owner was silently supporting the revolution, and he was surprised when he saw me and said “you’re out!”

I asked him to call my brother Safwan and inform him that I am out and going home.

### The Third Detention

On the evening of October 21, 2014, security forces were hovering around my parents’ house in “al-Baath” neighborhood. At 9.00 am on October 22, 2014, the doorbell rung, so I looked from “the door lens” where the security forces were standing outside, my sister and I thought that they came for the sequestration order on the stuff, which was issued by my sister in law (wife of my detained brother), after she filed a deposition case claiming that he’s a terrorist. I wore the prayer headscarf and opened the door, where an informant who came with them was pointing at me, so the officer

ordered to quickly bring all males/females ID cards. So, my sister brought them where my ID was on top, and he told her: "enough," he took it and grabbed me and started dragging me, so I started resisting and shouting "I am leaving my house" refusing to go with them, until my brother woke up and tried to pull the gun from the soldier's hand, but I yelled at him and said: "if I go I might return, but if you committed a crime you wouldn't return at all, one is enough." My oldest brother was detained, then they took my brother out in his underwear until I got dressed and came out. Where the street was surrounded by vehicles.

It was a joint patrol between military security and air force Intelligence, I was placed in a white jeep, and I told the soldier that I have a heart condition, and I need my medicine so I won't blackout in the car, so he said: "give me the name of the medicine and I will get it for you from the pharmacy," I was trying by this attempt to go back home to check up on my siblings to make sure that they didn't take anyone other than me. He actually left the vehicles waiting at the roundabout, took me to my parents' house, where my sister gave me a painkiller. I wasn't scared at all when I got arrested, and for the coincidence it was the first time I stay home in the morning, since my mother asked me to keep an eye on the pumpkin pot she was cooking.

I used to hide in my relative's home or our neighbors till night because I knew they will come one day to arrest me.

After that they took me and dropped me next to the "memorial" and left me so the passers-by can see me, while telling them this is the terrorist, three hours later they put me in a car and soon after, the car entered the gate of a school, where I found myself in a "state security branch." It was close to the memorial, they searched me and asked me if I am carrying a weapon, I replied negatively, I had five thousand SP in my pocket, all two hundred, so I was asked why the money amount was only from this category, I told them that I work as a house cleaner, and help my mother in vegetable catering, and I used to collect the payments for her. They took the money and took me to a room with one of our neighbors called (Y.T) was inside. I asked him to never mention my name as if we do not know each other. The guard noticed us talking, so he asked me: "is this your husband?" I told him that "I don't know him, and was only asking where he is from?" They took him to the interrogation and left me in a room with two detained women from Kafr Zita. About an hour later, the jailer came and took me to colonel Suleiman, who addressed asking: "are you Amira Tayyar, or Um Abdo?" I answered yes. He repeated the question three times, so I asked him why he was surprised. He answered: "since you're a terrifying terrorist, I thought Um Abdu is a big, fat woman." He continued saying literally "you are not wanted here, you are wanted for ten security branches in Damascus, and that's it." They returned me to the cell where I stayed for two days.

They didn't beat me at all but I was hearing voices of violence that was performed on men, after blindfolding me with white headscarf, I was called into the investigation room, he asked me: "What is your role in the revolution which you went out in because of al-Aroor he faggot?" I pretended that I feel sick from the blindfold so he would let me sit on the floor because I was thought someone is looking at my body from behind. I was afraid of being raped. The room where I was detained had a window with metal blades, one of the soldiers who is "very dirty" stands every night at the window from outside dropping his pants and masturbates while looking at us. We

were very scared of him and covered our faces fearing that he might take one of us and rape her.

He took the blindfold off and sat me down on the floor, and started asking me about things from the year 1982 till the day I stood before him, asking about details in my life I forgot about. He asked me about my dead uncle who was in the army and served at Hashem Mualla in Lebanon, he asked me also about my sick father and mother, I thought he knew what we used to eat in our house. Then he asked me about the mobile phones they found with me, with photos inside them, I told him "it's being repaired, and that I like photos and handsome men, and I used to save whatever I like online on this mobile".

They were easy with me in the investigation in the national security branch. I even felt that they sympathized with me, since I was not wanted to their branch but for other branches in Damascus, even though I was afraid.

He said to me, "I do not want anything from you except telling me what you know, and what your role is with a person called: (M.B), and a person called: M. Abu Hassan, and a person called: (B.P)," they were men I worked with in the revolution, but I completely denied my relationship with them. Then he asked me about the ID card of the informant, which was with me in my first detention. What helped me is that I did not change my words at all since the first investigation. He also asked me about helping the wounded. I said to him: "I might die if I see blood, so how can I help the wounded?" he also asked about martyrs' funerals, and I continued denying, then I stamped my fingerprint on papers and returned to the cell.

Half an hour later, he returned and opened the door. He was very angry and called me out. He was carrying a bundle of thick papers while screaming "If you had not fingerprinted your investigation, your execution would have been here in the state security." Then he told me "go away from my face" and left.

A few days later I was called, and the agent told me that I will be released and asked me to prepare my things tomorrow at eight o'clock in the morning to stand before the judge called: Firas Dunya.

There was five fifteen-years-old boys and me. I was interrogated by the judge. Who asked me the same questions as everyone investigated me before. I insisted on denying. I said that I only participated in demonstrations and did not commit anything else. Then the judge told me that I can go. I actually left the hall on my own, but the jailers followed me, and they held my arms behind my back and tied me with plastic cuff. Then they threw me in the meat-refrigerating vehicle that was transporting detainees. My mom was there. So they told her that they are taking me to complete the investigation. And I will be returned home in the evening or tomorrow morning. And that was on the first of October 2014.

I went to the military police before, and the sergeant major told me not to worry. A big recommendation came for my benefit. He advised me to get rid of any phone numbers I took from detention so that I could communicate with the families of detainees if I was released, because it is considered a major crime, so I got rid of them. Then I took a minibus to the military court, where I gave my testimony and then went out. My

mother was told that I would go to Hama's military security to complete the investigation.

I was locked in a toilet for six days, and I had six women with me. The toilet had an iron cover, and we were sitting every three women facing each other. Sitting this way was the most difficult thing in the world and we used to sleep standing. As for the food, it was a piece of boiled potatoes and two loaves of bread, one in the morning and the other for the evening, and in the evening they used to bring "soup," the food was very bad.

During the investigation, I was asked about my relationship with a person called: (M.M), I said, "I do not know him." He replied, "How do you not know him, and you are the one who aided him?" I told him: "I didn't see him, and I didn't aid him." I was asked why I went out in the terrorist demonstrations and the traitorous revolution. I replied that since I was arrested for the first time, he objected and said, "Do not say arrest say you terrorist." He insulted me, and cursed me while saying: "you whore" and asked me about Sheikh Mustafa, so I answered him that "he is bad man, and a faggot. Because he told us to go out and protests, against Bashar al-Assad because he did not punish those who removed the nails of children in Daraa."

Guards made fun of me while I was blindfolded, so I asked them to remove my blindfold and to sit on the floor, so they told me to sit on the chair, and then they pulled the chair from under me, and I fell down on the floor. They laughed at me, and then they removed the blindfold. He asked me about my role in the revolution and began threatening that he had recordings of the calls I had made from the phones I had with me. He also had pictures and videos of my demonstrations and my appearance on Al-Jazeera. While carrying a machine gun and shooting the air. It is all mentioned in the reports against me, but he just wants me to go and tell him where some people are, and I will be released and rewarded. But I denied knowing them completely, so he put me in the "wheel," but he couldn't beat me because my size was too small to fit in.

### **Palestine Branch**

I was transferred to Palestine Branch 215 in Damascus, with seven other girls, on the door written: "who enters is lost, and who is released is newborn." The smell was inside was like the smell of a slaughterhouse. After taking my belongings, I was personally searched by one of the detainees, and ordered me to take off my bra and underwear. And stay with my gown and to sit in a squat position, to make sure I am not hiding anything.

There are seven floors in the branch, they placed us on the second floor, and there was no ventilation. The investigation with me was similar to all previous investigations I had. In the first investigation, the investigator told me: "If you confess everything, you will be released tomorrow." I replied that I had nothing to confess. He ripped several papers in front of me and put it in a small envelope. When I told the girls about it, they told me that all the investigations I had in Hama are gone, and they will investigate with you from the beginning, then they left me for three months with no investigation.

Our condition was disgusting, gale, lice, and shabby clothes. Even the agent who used to bring the food was disgusted from putting his hand on the door handle. We were

sixty girls, and every day seven girls had to take a shower in ten minutes. Me with other detainees used to wash the girls' clothes until they shower. They put a bucket for us in the cell so we can use it outside the allowed period to use the toilet. The cells were nasty, and cockroaches were walking on the walls. Lice was sweeping inside. Each detainee has a slab space to sit on, and when we sleep, we sleep on our sides. Cells were equipped with a "voice and picture cameras" for observation and it written on the wall that they were installed on August 01, 2013.

Praying was forbidden in the branch, and those who they see through the cameras praying, will be punished. They told us, pray with our eyes, even the rosary was forbidden, and we used to pull strings from our clothes to make a rosary.

Once the branch director asked me to be the head of our cell, but I refused so that no one would think I am an informant. I told him: "I cannot because they will beat me. (The detainees)" and I told them about this request, they are like my sisters.

I took care of all the girls and left my food for the elders, or to ones that are hungry. I was eating a little, since my mind was always with my children and my brother, and I always wondered about my destiny.

There is a "shop" in Palestine branch, where we can buy some food and sanitary pads from our money in the prison secretaries, but the price was very high. For example, a kilogram of salt was for 2,000 SP. We used to ask the jailer to get us what we need to buy it for us, and any detainee did not have the money, she would borrow it from the others. Once she gets released from the detention, she would pay off her debt to the family of the detainee who gave her money.

There were forty-five detainees, I saw them when we left the branch, they looked like crazy, wounds covering their bodies, and they were peeing on themselves. The driver was constantly pressing the brakes, and detainees would fall on each other.

The worst kinds of torture, I suffered from was to put a tin-can under a tap of water dripping all day, it made me mad, so later I could not hear anything like this sound, like the sound of chewing.

The investigation used to start at twelve o'clock in midnight, and we knew that one has died when we hear them saying, "Sir, he's dead," and then they wrap him in a blanket and throw him on the stairs. Our psychological torture was more difficult than physical torture, they used to hit the heads of men against walls. While took the stairs on our way to investigation room, we saw blood and nails on the ground, and they never cared about anything.

During the next investigation with me, they broke three plastic sticks on my body. The investigators called them "Lakhdar Brahimi." Which broke my shoulder. He used to put off the cigarettes with my body. He asked me how rebels attacked the checkpoints and how they were killing the soldiers and asked me about the names of some of the rebels. And my answer to him was: "I do not know them, and I do not know anything." One time, the investigator took me to the bathroom, poured water on me, and shocked me with electricity. He accused me of practicing (jihad marriage). I said to him: "we have no jihad, and no shagging in streets and I don't know them, and never saw them."

I used to say to him. "You searched for my house, what did you see? You saw a bottle of whiskey" it was true, my husband used to drink alcohol a long time ago and the bottle was old.

One of the investigators, was from Deir ez-Zur, made me sit on the floor and beat me until I fainted and was taken to hospital 601.

### **Hospital 601**

I stayed in hospital 601 for a whole week, attached to the bed, with tied hands and legs. Where the soldier used to enter and wet my mouth with water only, I saw dead bodies dumped in the courtyard of the hospital, and transported in vehicles that look like garbage collectors. One of them told me in the hospital: "No one comes out of here alive." I asked him to bury me if I died, and not to leave my body for dogs to eat it. And he responded; "If your soul ascends to the seventh heaven, why does it mean to you what will happen to your body?" So, I started crying.

I heard one of them saying: This woman's son was here, in this room where I was. There were a lot of detainees, but there were curtains separating us.

One day, one of them entered my room and told me: "A big man called Azrael will enter and hit you with "Ghanaya," (which is a wooden stick with a top full of nails), on your head until you die, or they will inject you with an air needle to die." I also asked him to bury my body if I died. After fifteen minutes he asked me: "Are you ready?" I asked him "for what?" He untied my hands and feet, and they wanted to take me back to Palestine branch. I stayed until the morning in pain from being tied to the bed for a whole week.

### **Another night in Palestine branch**

When I returned to the branch, they told me: "They will take me to be executed." At twelve o'clock in the night, they put me in a square room under the ground, with six dead bodies of men in detention. On the wall, there was a big machine with that looks like a meat grinder, were one agent kept going in and out threatening me saying: "If you do not tell us who are the leaders you cooperated with, and from where weapons are coming? You will end up like of these people, your name was removed from civil records, and everyone knows that you are dead. Didn't you read what is written on the wall? Who enters is lost and who is released is newborn" I replied: "I have nothing to say." I stayed for six hours or more, while he was going in and out threatening me, then he put one of the dead bodies in the machine, and chopped it while telling me:

"The body now is in the sewers, but we will be you in it alive, not dead."

I collapsed, and was out of words. In fact, Abu Ghraib prison is easier than the Palestine branch.

I told the girls what happened to me, so they advised me to confess because it is easier than torture, but I did not confess. I know that I am dead here. If I say any name, and



they didn't find him, the women in his family will end up like me, and they will curse me.

After a while, one of them came in and said to me: "Amira Tayyar, your execution decision has been issued and you will be transferred to Sednayah prison." and took me out of the room. I found several investigators and men facing the wall, and one of them asked me to confess while kicking me: "till which class you studied" I told him: "To the first grade because I did not like school."

He had papers with him. I found three or four numbers on them were my phone numbers and a few words. Then he asked me do you know how to write and read? I answered him no, then asked me to fingerprint with the blue ink, where I fingerprinted with the other hand in red ink. He asked me, "Do you know on what you fingerprinted?" I replied, "No," and he said, "You fingerprinted on the death certificate of your son." I replied, "I will meet him in paradise," He got angry and said, "Paradise!" He hit me with his military boots on my face and I started bleeding, then I returned to my room.

At nine in the morning, two jailors came to me, one of them named Muhammad and the other Tarek. They asked me to search one of the detainees who will be released from the branch. The girl begged me not to hit her while searching her. I told her that I know she had phone numbers of detainees' families. She asked me to give her my family number: "No, you won't memorize it" and asked her to go, and I did not search her.

At eleven o'clock in the afternoon, one of the detainees searched me and asked me to get naked to make sure that there I have no phone numbers of the detainee's families. But we wrote the numbers on the sanitized pads paper. We also wrote them on a small paper and put them in our bras, so she found nothing.

Then the soldier told me that I am going home, so I went to the deposit box to pick up my bag. With my home keys and a coat belt inside it, where the five thousand SP that I had were taken from me. I thank god that my mobile phone was not with me or I wouldn't get released.

Before being transferred to the terror court, they brought with me five young people born in 1995, with their school bags. They looked like ghosts just like me, due to losing weight. A young man told me we thought only men are held in the branch and approached me and put his head on my shoulder. I felt that my children were with me and broke down a cried. We were tied up together, and we went into the prison bus to the terror court.

### **From the Terrorism Court to Adra prison**

We arrived at the court at four o'clock in the afternoon, I hoped I would not be forced to wear a blue dress, because it was terrifying for me. One of the soldiers asked me: How is morale? I said to him: High, so he asked me if I was hungry and asked me to give him five hundred SP so he can buy me a sandwich. I thanked him and told him that I had no money. And told me that the court working hours were over and I will be transferred to Kafar Sousah police station

When I entered Kafar Sousah police station, one of them asked me to clean the entire floor, and torture marks were still on my body. I told him that my shoulder was broken and my hands were swollen. I could not, but he forced me to clean it and wipe the ground. After I finished. He asked me again if I had any money to bring me food. He did not believe I did not; I don't have money. He opened my bag and made sure. Then he gave me a cup of tea and told me that they do not provide food here except for those can afford it.

After a week I went out, and they drove us by bus to all the branches. Where two or three girls came out from each branch. Then the bus waited in front of Hamidiyah Gate for three hours until the women came out of the court, and then we headed to Adra prison.

In Adra, I was surprised by the amount of a large number of girls whom I met at the Palestine branch. I thought they went to their homes. They greeted me all with joy when they saw me, where the jailor entered and said to me: "We will shave your hair because you came from a branch." I said to her: "I have no lice or scabies," so she checked my hair to make sure, and asked me: since when you didn't have a bath? I answered her: "five months ago because if I take a bath, my skin would peel, and I will start to scratch, and I will have scabies." She told me: "We will not shave your hair because you are clean of lice and scabies"

They gave me a blue bag. It was a gift from the United Nations and included a prison uniform, scarf, comb, shampoo, hair conditioner, repairing cream, and two slippers, besides to sanitary pads.

The jailor treated us badly, and at nine o'clock in the afternoon, the prison manager came for inspection and asked me, "Are you new?" I answered him: "Yes," and asked me what I wanted. "I want to hire a lawyer," I replied. He answered me: "After three months you have the right to hire a lawyer. Now you have the right to register for a doctor visit." I said, "I do not want to," so he said to me wondering, "And those swollen blue hands?" I didn't answer him because I asked him to give me a blanket. He answered me: "tomorrow we will give you, today sleep on the floor," and at twelve at night they shouted my name through the loudspeaker, and asked me to go to the prison director. He asked me insistently for several times about the blackness and my swollen hands, and why I am lifting them up. At first, I told him that I fell in the bus and then told him that I was tortured in the Palestine branch. He said, "oh dear god!" And added "you were released" I couldn't understand what he said, I thought he said: "execution" and I started jumping in my place saying: "where are you taking me?" so he calmed me down and said to me: "I mean, you're going home. You're going to sleep on your mother's lap and to see your children," then he ordered me a cup of lemon.

The policeman asked me while going out from the director's room: "don't you want to tip me for the good news?" I answered him that I have five hundred SP only, women gave to me in Kafar Sousah police station to eat. So, he said if it weren't for the shelling outside the prison, we would have asked you to go to the Umayyad mosque, and there the Sheikh will give you money to go to your home. We ask all the girls to go to get the money for the road.

In the morning, I called my mother and asked her to come to visit me because I was in Adra prison. She started to cheer and told me that she gave four hundred and fifty thousand SP for someone who told her that he will help me get released from prison in Homs. Among with ten thousand SP for the road, also clothes for me and an electric generator and electricity tools, I told her: "I didn't get anything from what you mentioned, he is a liar."

On the day after they dropped me from the bus, I rode into, because I had a visit. I saw my mother, my daughter, my mother-in-law, and my sister coming to visit me with things for me. But I had to wait for the girls to come back from courts. I distributed the money and things I had to the girls who did not have a visit, even the new clothes I was wearing, I gave to them and wore one of their shabby clothes.

I left the prison at eight o'clock at night and found my mother waiting in front of the prison door, where a lawyer named (H.H) helped me obtain the stop search paper.

In Hama, despite the obvious marks of torture on me, I went out the next day to the street and approached one of the buyers to buy hummus, so person next to him said to him: "is she crazy!" I replied, "No, I'm not crazy, but I was detained at the regime." He stood up, kissed my feet and apologized.

### **Menstrual cycle**

In the military security branch of Hama, when I was in the solitary cell, which was a toilet, they brought another female detainee called (N.D) on that day my period started. I had nothing to use as a pad, so I cut my sleeve, because I was embarrassed to tell the jailer who was in his early twenties, but the next day the symptoms of menstruation began with the other detainee, we did not know what to do, we knocked on the door until the jailer came, and asked us what we want, we told him that we want sanitized pads. He asked us to give him money, we said: we have no money, so he closed the door and left.

Then the doctor came to the daily inspection for all the prisoners. He measured my blood pressure, and it was very low. He ordered the jailer to bring me some salt. He brought a rotten tomato with some salt. I refused to eat it, so he gave me some salt, and then I told the doctor that the other detainee and I are in the menstrual period and that the soldier refused to provide us with sanitized pads unless we give him the money. The next day he gave us a bag of cotton bandages after we used pieces of a black sweater for one of the detainees then wash it to use it again.

Every time a detainee left the branch, we to give her a soap and a sanitary pad. None of us knew where we would go. In many branches, they used to put for us eucalyptus with water to cut off our menstrual cycle.

### **Challenges**

After I was released from detention, I went back to my family's home and entered one of Hamas hospitals for treatment. I stayed there for ten days, during where I treated my broken shoulder and the infections in my body. I had a hot and cold temperature, and I

was no longer able to walk. I suffered from joint pain, I had a joint infection, due to folding my knee in the cell. I was wanted by the leader of one of Shabiha militias in Hama. One of them contacted me, and he was surprised by my release. He informed me that he would transfer me to the air intelligence branch to complete the investigation. I will stay there for a one month, then a month later they will transfer me to Damascus where I should apply for a release, but it was impossible to surrender myself to them, "I would rather die, then surrendering myself to them," so I moved to Turkey.

Now from the severe stress on me, I say to myself: I wished I died in prison and did not get out of it, I find it very difficult to live in Turkey, I have no one, I lost the financial supporter, but God does not forget anyone, my daughter sweeps the stairs and teaches the Turkish language for Arabs, and Arabic to some Turks, who travel in Ramadan to Jerusalem and she is a volunteer in the Red Crescent. Now I only go out with my daughter, sometimes I stay home for almost a whole week, or month, I do not go out because I do not speak Turkish, I did not try to learn because I am old.

"I want to speak a foreign language in this age" If I had spoken Turkish well, I would go out talk about my story and our suffering.

The experience of the detainee is the same experience for both male and female. Men torture is similar to women torture, according to my experience. When you confess, you do not torture like if you did not confess. I was tortured so much because I did not confess.

### **My previous experience with documentation**

They come to us a lot to document what happened to us. And talk to us about the importance of supporting the detainees. They took our names. Where they got a lot of money hundreds of thousands, to help us, and they do not give us anything

I documented with a person called: J.S, who promised us, that he will open a bakery and its income to support the detainee's families, and he didn't keep his word.

One of the organizations paid five hundred Turkish liras to ten detainees. Then they put our names and did not pay us anything. They got paid under our names and lied to us. One of the Turkish organizations documented my story, but I found that the responsible Syrian woman in this organization had a house and a car because of the money she took under the name of our case.

One of the detainees told me: "One of the supporting parties required before giving us its support, to document what happened to us first." I trusted them and did not give me anything.

One of the French international organizations documented my case in the Kayseri area. They told me they would file a lawsuit after the fall of Bashar al-Assad.

One of the women's support organizations documented my case in Antakya, and they had doctors with them from different specialties. They told us they would give us monthly salaries, but we did not get anything. They are supporting certain people,

some of the detainees take from some organization three hundred and fifty euros per month.

And some of the detainees are getting paid from an organization thousand Turkish lira.

I called them, and they said to me: "go work you, and your daughter, we give those who have young children" But I am still documenting my experience because we want to take Bashar al-Assad down. I wanted to document now so the world can hear our voices, and knows we how Bashar al-Assad tortures people. Western countries believe that the detainee in Syria has rights and treated like the detainee in their country. They believe that the crisis in Syria is terrorism, and they do not know what happened.

### **Relationship with family and community**

My friendships remained as they were after the arrest, but my most important questions were addressed to me: "Did they rape you?"

Except for my parents, who never asked me this question. Quite the opposite, when I reached home, they shot and celebrated, and carried me on the shoulders to express their joy. They welcomed me as if I am a bride, by giving me support, they are proud of me, and they consider that what I did was better than what a thousand men did.

Even the women I helped them cleaning their houses came to my house to congratulate me, some of them cooked meat for me, and some of them gave me presents because everyone thought I was dead under torture, at the beginning no one believes that I was released.

### **Final word:**

I am no longer happy with my life after the experience of detention. I was diagnosed with cancer in the gland, and I did surgery. I was under chemotherapy. My life has been completely destroyed, but I thank god anyway. I am still strong and determined to take al-Assad down. I will take my sons' revenge, who died, even after a hundred years.

And my husband and son are still in Sednaya prison, and I am patient because I am the same as all mothers and wives.

The fairness of male and female detainees begins with the prosecution of criminals under the international law for war crimes, honoring male and females' detainees highlighting their suffering during the period of detention.

It is my duty and a duty of every free person to be part to the prosecution against every criminal who was the reason of our displacement, who killed and displaced our people, and against those who committed the most severe torture and arbitrary detention against us, only because we demanded freedom and dignity.

We are the rightful owners, the right doesn't die, and I will do my duty to claim the perpetrators of crimes, and for me, it is not a negotiable issue.



## Shams al-Dimashqiya, Damascene Sun<sup>8\*</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> - Mona Baraka, interview with the author via WhatsApp, on: March 02, 2019, duration: 3.20 hours.

\*Cover By: Dilwar Souliman





My name is Muna Baraka. I was born on 9 February 1984. I am from Damascus and I live in al-Kadam area. I graduated as a teacher, I studied Islamic law for only one year, and got married in 2002. I have two children and I was dedicated to raising them. My first child is fifteen years old now, and the second is thirteen. I currently live in Turkey, specifically in Reyhanlı.

I was arrested for the first time before the revolution in 2001 because of my participation in collecting aid for Gaza. I was detained for forty-eight hours. This situation remained with me until the beginning of the revolution in 2011. My family was opposed to the Syrian regime; this pushed us, my brothers and I, to participate in the revolution, and we worked in the coordinator [units]. I was the founder of all the coordinators in my area (Yarmouk, Kadam, Hajar al-Aswad and others). We organized demonstrations in these areas, wrote slogans and decided who would chant them. We distributed surveillance tasks of the roads among families, so they could inform us of security forces entering the area during a demonstration; and I spread the news if security went in or out, and if I heard bullets.

I worked in the shadows, online. I did not participate in demonstrations because my parents are very conservative. They forbade me to appear in public or mingle [with men]. I collected and reported news, and took photographs from a high perch in our house overlooking al-Dabbe square, which the people later named Freedom Square. I edited the news and wrote reports for Arab channels, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya; I enjoyed credibility among the rebels, and I spoke on behalf of the south (south of Damascus and the western region) from mid-2012 to the beginning of 2013. Despite this, I only appeared twice in public because I was afraid for my family. I was residing in a sensitive location that was easy for the regime to reach. Especially after the arrest of my two brothers: the first, a lawyer, was detained for a week by the district Branch on 22 April 2011, on the Friday that was named "Good Friday"; the second was detained for two days then later thrown onto a roadside, where we found him suffering from shock, unable to speak for fifteen days.

I kept working in the shadows until 2014, under two pseudonyms: "The Free Damascene" and "Damascene Sun." I began to use the second name when the first name became wanted by security and my online account was hacked.

We were forced to flee from al-Qadam when conditions became dangerous; the Alawites attacked our homes with knives and machetes in July that same year. This attack was a reaction against a background of provocations between them and the youth of the revolution, in addition to rising concern from continuous raids by the regime. When they knocked on the doors they took all males aged 12 and above. Not even empty houses survived, as they stole or broke everything inside. I witnessed these raids with my eyes.

One time, in 2011, they stopped a bus and took everyone in it to Freedom Square and stomped all over them. Sectarianism hadn't existed before the revolution. It was a card the regime played; all the senior officers and senior state employees are from his community. Younger people felt this exclusion and couldn't express it – which led a number of officers of different ranks to defect; they were excluded from the decision-making circle, and they didn't have real authorities. As for us, from the beginning of the revolution we held up banners reading "No to sectarianism".

We fled to Western Ghouta after regime bombing that left a group of young people martyred. We stayed there for twelve days. When Ramadan came we returned to our homes although the situation hadn't improved. Houses stood empty, their owners having left. We remained without electricity, eventually causing my parents to return to al-Ghouta. We refused to go with them, my brothers and their wives and I, and we lived together in our house.

We felt very optimistic when we heard the news of the explosion of the "Crisis Cell" on 18 July 2012, and as a result demonstrations increased and residents began to return. Life started to seem more normal. Then when the men armed themselves and appeared on Al Jazeera channel holding weapons, the regime started indiscriminate shelling again. Tanks entered on 21 Ramadan 2012 and began shelling randomly. We hid in an underground cellar, and many people were martyred and wounded. The next morning, we left al-Qadam permanently and went to work in relief with a charity association, whose work continued from late 2012 until 2014. I was the manager, I collected donations and we built warehouses and developed our work extensively. Aid started coming in to us and we distributed it among areas besieged by the regime, such as Yarmouk camp, al-Hajar al-Aswad, and al-Qadam. Of our many projects were those to sponsor orphans and to open a charity pharmacy in Western Ghouta. There were no women in the association except me and "Um Jawad" in al-Qadam area, and she later died. After that, I was pursued by the regime who tried to uncover my identity. The majority of my family didn't oppose my work, especially my father because most of it was done via the internet, and aimed at helping people. My mother sometimes accompanied me when I had to attend meetings and visit warehouses. Naturally, I didn't tell my family everything I was doing as I feared for them from the regime, and because the nature of charity work requires you do not publicize it [*religious belief*], and also in order not to affect my father, as my uncle was opposed to my work and he has a strong personality and is a figure of authority in the family, even though my father is the oldest of his brothers.

Sometime later, we received warnings to evacuate our homes because the regime was preparing to storm Khiyarat Danoun town, but my family refused to leave. We stayed and the regime entered the town. It started its campaign with bombs. All the men's names were inspected, and a man working in the association I run was arrested.

This is when my family decided that I should hide as they were afraid for me, and they sent me to my uncle's house in Khan al-Sheh. While I was there I couldn't move or perform my activities or make any contact for fear my location would be discovered through my mobile phone; when the regime sieged an area, it would shell the location where a 'wanted' phone number was used, like my own phone number. Shortly afterward, my father came and took me back to our home in Khiyarat Danoun. I couldn't stand to see the regime flag and pictures of Bashar al-Assad again in the area, so I left immediately to join my brother, who was staying at his in-laws' house in al-Kiswah, despite the difficulty of passage. I had to walk through orchards to avoid numerous checkpoints, because I was carrying a lot of memory sticks and the association's stamp and important documents that would definitely cause me to be arrested.

### **Ambush**

I was arrested on 9 June 2014 by a raid battalion of the Military Security Branch 215. They ambushed me after they hired a girl to communicate with me over the phone; she told me that she knew one of my friends and wanted to help me find a house. I wasn't persuaded to begin with, but I didn't suspect her. She told me where to meet her and promised to help me find a house to live with my brother and his family. The place was a clinic which I already knew, and when I arrived I called her and she told me she would be there in five minutes, but she didn't come. A raid [battalion] van arrived instead and arrested me and my brother's wife.

I tried to save my brother's wife and told them that she had nothing to do with anything and that she was pregnant, but one of them replied sarcastically "We will make her deliver". Another agent opened the door; he was huge and was wearing a straw hat and the military uniform worn by National Defense agents. He asked: "Which one of you is Damascene Sun?" I answered him: "I am", and he said: "You bastard, we have been looking for you for 2 years", and added: "Do you know the new law issued by President Bashar Al Assad?" I answered: "I do not know it." He said: "Ten people will supervise your rape, Shams", and closed the door of the van and said to them: "Take her to the branch." They blindfolded us and took us away and my sister-in-law's crying was making my heart hurt, especially when she looked at me and said "I am not guilty". I was afraid because my bag contained memory sticks, the association's stamp, and my mobile phones.

All the way there, the agent sitting next to me would put his hand on my legs and I would remove it, and they insulted us with dirty words: "Girls of a whore, prostitutes, etc." Their words were very disturbing, I wasn't used to hearing such things from anyone my whole life.

### **Military Security 215**

Inside the branch, they took all my personal belongings and put them in deposit. At the time, elections were being held for Bashar al-Assad, and one of the agents asked me if I elected Bashar Al Assad and looked at my finger [*for an ink-print*]. I answered no, and he hit me on my face so hard I immediately lost consciousness. I asked my sister-in-law to tell my father that I would definitely die and to ask him to take care of my children. One slap was enough to render me unconscious and when I came to, my ears were bleeding from the slap. They brought me a computer and asked me to open all my accounts on social media and my email. Every time I refused they hit on my head. After my repeated refusals, they decided to speak to me kindly; they said we would help each other to access my accounts and communicate with the men I knew in order to lure them. I began to cry and scream, and they started beating me severely in front of my sister-in-law, and an agent called Anas was telling me continuously: "When you go to your God, tell him the engineer Anas sent me to you". Then they put us behind a door with our faces to the wall. I tried to communicate with my sister-in-law, who was crying and saying, "I want to get out of here". I tried to reassure her that she would be released, and told her to ask my father to forgive me, and to issue me a death certificate, and to tell him that my children are under his custody. I was feeling guilty about him and my uncles who would blame him for tolerating my work. The agent Anas yelled and cut off our conversation. Then he dragged my sister-in-law and said to her "What is this whore telling you?" I found out later that he interrogated her and asked her about me and my husband, but she didn't say anything, so they released her on the same day, but was unable to speak for fifteen days after she was released. Then they took me to a large hall where there were 25 young men, most of whom around 16 and 17 years old, the oldest no more than 25, their faces to the wall, blindfolded and naked except for their underwear. They were dragged to interrogation one by one, and I heard them being tortured. A group of them died under torture, around 6 people. They were tortured with electricity, their screams increasing and echoing around the hall, with the sound of that agent beating them as he walked back and forth to the door.

There was only one armchair to sit on and I was standing close to it, so I hid inside it 200\$ which I had put in my bra for the house rent. Inside the hall was a small torture room, each person went in for almost half an hour to be tortured. All the while, I imagined I would be next, that I would go in and die like the rest, especially when I heard the voice of the soldier performing the torture saying: "Remove this dog he's dead, cover him and take him from here." Until today, every time I remember the sounds of their torture with electricity, I shake. The torture continued from 6 in the evening until 10 at night, during which time I continued to recite from the Qur'an.

This wasn't my biggest fear; after a while they took me to a small room, and an old man entered and told me to take off my clothes. This is when I collapsed, crying and begging him to reconsider, but he threatened to shock me with an electric stick he was carrying. Before him, Anas had threatened me with burning and rape. I was forced to take off all my clothes. He started to search me and asked me to squat and bend, he touched my breast and molested me under the pretext of searching, and I pleaded with him, saying: "Why are you doing this?", and he answered: "You might have a dollar hidden in your vagina!"

Afterwards, I put on my clothes, still crying, and the agent who they sent to take me to the sixth floor asked me, "Do you work in prostitution?" I said to him: "Shame on you, you shouldn't speak to me like this", and he replied: "You all pretend to be decent in front of us". I did not answer him, and we continued walking.

On the sixth floor, there were many rooms with communication equipment and three interrogation rooms. The agent took me to one of them and next to a big iron door said: "Abu Ali, open up". The man who opened the door was terrifying, and I thought it was the torture room, so I screamed and told the agent: "Please don't leave me here", but he asked me to be calm, and then they took me into a room where I saw twenty girls, and I was a little reassured. The room was called "13". When I entered, the girls in the room started asking me questions about why I had been arrested but I didn't answer them. I sat next to a woman with a comforting face and began to cry and asked her: "Will they rape me?" She said: "No, they won't, don't be afraid", but I couldn't stop crying and praying. The girls warned to me if I wanted to perform my ablutions and pray, I shouldn't say it in front of the jailer. I waited for our bathroom turn, and I washed up and prayed, and I heard my name again. I was called for interrogation in the branch Brigadier's office, I think his name was H.D.

He was sitting behind a large table and surrounded by six Shabiha agents and an interrogator. After they had copied all my emails, the person sitting behind the table said to me, "So, Damascene Sun?" I tried to deny everything, at the recommendation of the girls, but he stopped me and said, "No, No, don't you dare open your mouth. This is your file, see it. I gave you the nickname Shiny Sun. We planned your ambush a long time ago". And on my personal file was written "Damascene sun, the shiny sun". The Brigadier began to sing "Will I meet you tomorrow?" by the famous singer Umm Kulthum. Of course, I couldn't respond. When he stopped singing, he told me that they had studied me and discovered that I was a radical Salafi Wahhabist, and cursing "You dog, you whore, I will [*expletive*] all the country's mosques one by one, who do you think you are, working against the state, you are mere trash."

He started to interrogate me after they sat me in a chair in the middle of the room, with Anas to my side, who would hit me every time the Brigadier asked me a question, after he showed me the news I had posted and the conversations I had had on social media. He was asking me

about every person I had communicated with. I kept on denying I knew their names, and then the Brigadier came from behind his desk and grabbed my head violently and said: "I will strangle you, bitch, if you don't tell me who the men you were working with are and where they are." But Anas left me no room to answer as he beat me and shouted: "Talk, bitch". Then he brought a stick full of nails and began to hit me hard on my hands, which swelled immediately, but I didn't scream because the Brigadier was taking pleasure in my screams and saying: "You're moaning like it's entering inside of you." Until my strength collapsed and I began to scream and tried to push the stick away from me, but I wounded my hand, and the Brigadier told them to leave me, even though the agent asked for his permission to kill me. It was a nightmare I wanted to wake up from, my father's picture in my mind the whole time. They brought me back to reality asking me about a young man I knew from the coordinators, his name was Abu Jaafar. They asked me to tell them his real name and where he was. I told them that his name was Ahmad Al Ali and that he was martyred. At this, he attacked me and started beating me severely, saying: "Say he went to hell, he went to hell". The torture lasted for more than four continuous hours, during which I fainted once and was brought to with a slap on my face. I thank God that I didn't confess about any man, and they took me back to the room.

The girls started asking me questions again about what happened with me, but I didn't answer and sat in the corner of the room. I refused food and drink for eight days. During this time, I imagined my son Mohamad coming in holding bread as usual and calling "Mama." I replied out loud: "Mama, my love." Everyone looked at me and thought that I had lost my mind, and I started screaming: "Why did you close the door? I want my son." They poured water on my face and told me what I had done. After I was released, I learned that my son Mohamad had been very much affected by my absence. He used to sit in the place where I usually sat, sleep in the same place where I slept, and that he locked himself in a room the first day of my detention, and refused to eat and drink, or play with his friends.

One time, a woman from Kafr Nabudah in Hama countryside approached me and told me they would take me again to be interrogated. She told me to pay attention to my answers and not to tell them the names of the men I knew. Eight days later, they called me again, and the Brigadier and agent Anas were there again. My suffering started all over again with beatings and losing consciousness. Every time they asked me something, I said: "Ahmad is responsible", because he was martyred and they couldn't reach him. Once they asked me about the name of someone who worked with me in the association. He had told me previously that they knew him, and I could give them his name if I were arrested. Despite this, I asked him to forgive me after I was released because I mentioned his name in the Branch, and he answered: "It's ok, they have known about me for a long time."

After ten days, the Brigadier told me that my file was closed and I would stay in the branch for two years and spend the rest of my days in life imprisonment. I cried a lot and pleaded with him that I wanted my children, but he said on condition I take a car with him and hand in the men and women I had worked with. When I refused, he assured me that I wouldn't be released, even though I felt reassured that my file was closed. I convinced myself I had to adapt to the situation. I tore a section of my blanket to sleep on, and used my coat as a pillow, and started to eat and drink again. I began to read the writings on the walls of room 13. I found the names of Marwa Arnous, Faten Rajab, and Duaa Muhammad. I wrote my name and some information about me: Muna Baraka, Damascene Sun, member of the coordinator units of the Revolution, media office, and member of the Human Rights Commission. After two months, I became the oldest of the detainees there, helping new girls and telling them about the nature of interrogations, and I became loved by everyone.

They used to allow us to bathe once every twenty days. We used to clean the room and wipe the floor. We used the food bowl to wash our clothes and to clean. We also took turns to prevent rats, mice, and cockroaches from entering the room through a space under the door. In Ramadan, I remained fasting for days, not eating because of the cockroaches coming onto the food we had kept aside until Iftar time, but sometimes because of extreme hunger, we had to remove the cockroaches and eat. They gave us bread and a few olives, sometimes a little yogurt in the morning, some potatoes or bulgur and lentil soup in the evening, sometimes to avoid our sugar levels dropping they give us a little jam.

In one of the rooms near ours, there were some young men who had been detained since the beginning of the revolution. There were also some Tunisians. We could see them through the peep-hole overlooking the corridor. They looked like skeletons, dragging themselves and leaning on each other to walk. The building with the torture room was a three-minute walk away from us, and we could still hear their screams during torture all night long. Sometimes we would beat our heads against the wall and say "We wish it was us and not them". I remember one time I was very sick and had toothache and they took me to the prison manager. I met one of them then and asked him after I had made sure the room had no cameras: "Are you a prisoner like us?" He said "Yes, and remember my name when you're released. I am Rami Haqqi, an anesthesiologist from Homs. They arrested me while I was leaving for Lebanon." One time when I had allergy from the blankets, I tried to ask the same man about the names of the detainees, perhaps know something about my husband and relatives, but he was afraid and asked me not to talk to him at all and to act as if I didn't know him so I wouldn't cause him or myself any problems.

## To Adra Prison

After two months, I was transferred to the military court in Mazzeh, where we stayed until four in the afternoon, and then they took us to Ruken al-Din police station and squeezed us in a very small room with a group of girls. We couldn't sit unless we bent our legs. I stayed there for two days, then they transferred us to Adra prison in August. I met many girls who welcomed me and told me that this prison is better than the branch and that here I could drink coffee; they had heard from me earlier that I love coffee.

Twenty days after my arrival, they allowed me to call my family. I didn't know who to call as I hadn't memorized any numbers, and then I found my cousin's number in the prayer book in my bag. I spoke to him and asked him about my children, my father, and my mother and told him where I was. After this period, they transferred me to court, and I stayed in the fifth section, the committal section, and here I was able to breathe and meditate. Then the lawyer who my family hired came and told me that if I were released in two years, it would be a very good thing as my file was huge; I was working with a charity association that supports terrorists. Relief for them means funding terrorist acts, and funding information [sharing] means to them communicating with rebels. I thanked God and tried to cope with the situation. I used to read the Quran a lot, but most of the time I was alone. The environment was very scary, a person could be your friend one day and the next day inform on you to the prison brigadier, who in turn transfers you to the branch.

One time I told one of the detainees about my work and my desire to expose all the torture and violations when I was released. When we heard the sounds of bombing and fighting between the regime and the FSA, and RPGs were firing from behind the prison, I would pray to God to help the FSA to win. I felt that her attitude towards me changed. Then suddenly the section supervisor – they choose for this task the dirtiest girls accused of prostitution and drugs – came in and said to me: "Listen, you Mona, talk about outside your FSA shit outside the prison not here". I asked her what she meant, so she answered "Today you will know what I mean". In the evening, the prison brigadier yelled my name while he was knocking on our door. I went asking what he wanted, but he started beating me with a stick he was carrying, saying: "Listen, you don't speak about your FSA shit here. If you don't hold your tongue, I will cut it for you in the political security branch. And your prayers against us, we put under our feet". I realized then a warning one of the previous detainees had given me before she was released that there were snitches amongst us. Also, if a detainee liked something belonging to another and couldn't get it, she accused its owner of any charge and told on her. Once one of the detainees was beaten in front of us after other accused her of a charge and told on her.

After that, I isolated myself from the girls, because I didn't want to be beaten, or thrown in solitary confinement, or in the terrifying basement, where a girl named Najla died, only twenty



years old. She died after suffering from tuberculosis. She kept screaming and remained without food or drink for fifteen days until she died. Before putting her in the basement, they committed her to solitary, after they shaved her hair in the military hospital and told the prison administration that she would die soon of illness. But some of the detainees complained about her being close to us fearing they would catch the disease. So the prison brigadier threw her in an individual cell in the terrifying basement. At night we used to hear the cats howling and the wind hissing as if there was a ghost living there. She was vomiting blood and couldn't move, we used to see hear her and try to console her from the prison court overlooking her room until the brigadier prevented us, and when we couldn't hear her screams anymore we told the brigadier and everyone knew that she had died. At that time, the brigadier entered our room and told us that that Najla's release form had been issued, and I said to myself: "Son of a bitch, you released her after she died."

After two months and twenty days, I was transferred to the terrorism court. We sat under the stairs of the court in a small room not larger than one square meter. In front of us a row of young men were tied in chains. Whenever the agent was annoyed with them, or if one of them moved out of the line, he struck the chain with electricity until it reached all the detainees. This agent, named Abu Haidar, kept asking us if we wanted to use the bathroom, but we did not reply because he was harassing the girls when they entered the bathroom. Everyone was looking at us dressed in criminal robes and tied up in chains. Then I heard my name and the judge asked me, the seventh judge, what more I could do after everything I had done. I denied everything, and he asked me to sign a detention paper. I begged him for mercy and screamed madly requesting to see my children, but he forced me to sign. I couldn't stop weeping, and everyone who heard me cried. I asked one of the detainees, after the judge told her that she was released, to tell my family that I need clothes. I had nothing in prison, they were visiting me but they hadn't brought me anything. And they used to tell me, "You do not need it, we are working on getting you out of prison." But winter came, and I would wrap myself in my coat and sleep under the bed, because I was not always able to get a blanket.

They transferred me into the detention section of Adra prison. I became friends with one of the detainees, called Hanadi. We ate together and slept on the same blanket until the brigadier drove us apart, and put each one of us in a room because someone had snitched on us.

There was another, also called Hanadi, from al-Kadam. She was convinced that she would be released in a truce. Indeed, when the regime was negotiating for al-Qadam, the [rebels] demanded the release of the detainees. 6 out of 35 detainees were released. Hanadi and I were among those who were released, after one month and twenty days in the detention section. I screamed with joy when the jailer told me to prepare myself to go home. The road was not easy. At each checkpoint, they brought dogs up to us to smell and see if we had any drugs. We arrived at Branch 48 – State Security, and sat in the basement for an hour and a half. At the

time, we thought we would never leave, and then we were told to sign a pledge not to practice terrorist acts, and the brigadier of the Palestine Branch told us that Bashar Al Assad had signed my and Hanadi's release and that we are going to the municipality and there would be pictures taken, and a committee would attend to receive us.

The municipality is a large government department. They took us into a large hall where there were several officers in addition to a group of men from al-Qadam who had come to receive us, and they gave me a paper stating that I had to review Building 123 – Palestine Branch in al-Qazzaz area. I asked them: "What is this paper?" and one of them answered: "It is a routine procedure". I told him in front of everyone: "What are the guarantees that you will not arrest me again?!" But the committee that came to receive us assured me, and they took us to al-Qadam station, where my uncle was waiting for me. I was very scared of him, thinking he might kill me, but he took me to my sister's house nearby. On the way, he was telling me he wished I had been more careful. I was crying and said to him: "You're not going to kill me?" He was astonished and said: "Why would I kill you?" and I asked him to tell me the truth: "Are you going to prevent me from going out?" He replied, "What you did, I couldn't do; we hold our heads high because of you. We told the people what you were doing. I would have been the first to kill you, but after I heard about you from the people who were working with you, I tell you that we hold our heads high because of you. Then he embraced me and said: "I did the impossible to get you out of prison."

Two days later, when the committee insisted and gave me assurances that I would not be arrested again because of the truce, I said my prayers and went with my mother to Palestine Branch, but they didn't let her in with me. They welcomed me and asked me directly to work with them and be their recruit, and give them the names of the men I know. They asked me to buy a phone line so they could follow me and know my location, and warned me against telling anyone about this. I told them I would think about it, and when I returned home, I told my father and he decided that I had to travel. So I moved with my children from Damascus to Hama at the end of May 2015, after I broke the phone sim card which I had bought to communicate with them and threw it away. And after about ten days I headed to Idlib, reaching Turkey through a Turkish governmental official, Kaymakam, who helped me in return for nothing.

I arrived in Turkey without my husband, who had disappeared when he entered al-Kadam in June 2012, when he was arrested along with seven other men by the 1st Division. He was going to bring some things from our house after we were displaced and never returned. At that time, checkpoints agents were arresting every man whose ID card shows he is from al-Qadam; if it was a woman, they checked her thoroughly. Al-Kadam became known as having undergone "field execution", because so many of its men were arrested at checkpoints and executed, and their dead bodies were thrown in the streets of the neighborhood. Many of my

relatives were martyred in the fighting, and some of them were in Daraa, and my cousin, who was there, tried to settle with the regime, but they took him, and he disappeared.

When I arrived in Turkey I lived in an orphanage for about two months, during which time I was looking for a job every day. Unfortunately, no one, including the organizations I had previously worked with, helped me. Eventually, I found work as a secretary in a dentist's clinic. I cleaned the clinic and the equipment. So the custodians of the orphanage asked me to leave after I found a job. I rented a house and moved into it with my children, and it was empty. Twenty days later, my son had a traffic accident. A car ran him over and he remained in bed being treated for four months after they installed steel rods in his leg. I suffered a lot with my work and my son's accident. I started working with an organization as a volunteer, and after six months I got a salary, so I left work at the dentist's clinic and gradually I started to establish myself and buy things for the house. I opened a relief office after the people I was working with sent me two thousand dollars, and in parallel with the office job I worked voluntarily with several organizations, and my financial situation was helped by having a Red Crescent [aid] card.

I emerged from these experiences and from detention stronger. I used to trust people, but they have now become [bus] stops for me, except for the main people in my life. I used to be emotional and impulsive, and now I am more balanced and more self-reliant, but I have become more quick-tempered. I am still active as a volunteer in relief, and I work hard to support myself and my children, and I don't owe anybody anything. I learned a lot during my stay in Turkey. I started from zero several times and didn't give up. I was honored a while ago by the National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. I was also honored in a conference I attended with five activists by the Conscience Movement, and my message to every detainee and woman has always been not to be weakened.

I don't think that the experience of detention differs from men to women. Some returned stronger after the arrest, and many female detainees who were not active before their arrest are now active. Some of the detainees were released with psychological issues as a result of being raped. The husband of one of my friends still has marks on his hand from torture, even though he was released in 2013. His wife tells me that his penis was black from severe beating, and that he refrained from having sex with her for a long time because he looked at her with disgust, as they had both been detained, and she told me always that she was invisible to him. When she wore makeup he would say: "Take it off, it's disgusting!" She told me that she took him for treatment in psychiatric centers until he improved, and was able to resume his sexual activity.

I didn't receive any psychological support, even though for a long time after my release from detention I would hear the screams of detainees under torture. And many times, my children

told me that I was talking during my sleep. I often wake up out of breath, and sometimes I dream that security is chasing me and I am running away from them. I asked a psychiatrist about it and he told me it could be psychological effects or old trauma, which appear after some time in the form of nightmares, abdominal pain or other.

### **Relationship with family and community**

I only communicate with my father and mother, and the rest of the family members are not pleased with the fact that I traveled, arguing that I am a single woman, and until today they blame my father for allowing me to travel. He got sick and had heart surgery as a result of quarrels between him and his brothers because of my travel, he told them that I was wanted by the security branch, but they weren't convinced, and they do not contact me, and there is no way for me to settle with the regime. Even my arrest, some see it positively, and some see it negatively. The first question my sister asked me after I was released was: "Did anyone touch you?" and no matter how much I answered, none of my family will believe me because the security agents threatened to rape me in front of my brother's wife. My father said to me: "You raised our heads high, we are honored with what you did and don't imagine you are a disgrace to us. If they touched you in detention, we believe in God's fate, it is not your fault, you're not guilty. And if they didn't touch you, thank God, it was God who released you", and this was his answer to those questions.

I feel in Turkey as if I am completely alone. My contact with my family is once every twenty days and sometimes once a month, either because of the bad internet or because of their fear of the regime. My mother is the only one who risks calling me, after I challenged the regime and broke the phone sim card and left. After I left, an agent from Palestine Branch called my family and asked about me, so my sister told him that I got married and traveled abroad, but he told her that they had circulated my name to all checkpoints.

My aim is that the detainees' voices are heard, and that the world knows about Najla, who died in the basement, and all the other detainees I saw martyred under torture.

I now work with a lot of men and forget that I am a female. I was hurt a lot from some girls, but my friends tell me: "It's jealousy, because I was arrested due to my own activity and not due to someone else's, and that trees bearing fruit are shaken the hardest." Even when I was honored I wasn't left alone by some of them, and I received calls from them mostly asking "why were you the one to be honored? Why didn't you mention us? who told you to speak in our names?" and my response was that I didn't represent anyone and that the party which honored me had chosen me, should I have told them I didn't want this honor?!

Although I don't talk about my story because I consider it the same as a lot of other stories, and I was detained because of my work and not because of someone else's, and I had been aware

it might lead to my arrest and might also lead to my death, I have faced many cases of abuse; yet I face nastiness with kindness, I know that my road is difficult and I suffer from harassment, but I won't back down.

### **Final word**

In the end, Bashar Al Assad should be tried with all his security services and the “popular committees” [Shabiha] who abused the people, and everyone who bombed and destroyed and committed crimes. Justice and fairness is with their trial and compensation for the people for what they suffered through years, especially women. We have been trying for a while to form an association for female detainees, because we lost our providers, and some of those who were married after detention have separated from their husbands. I was one of them, I was divorced 2 months after marriage, and I lost my job due to shock of the divorce; I was absent for a week, so they fired me. One of them told me “Who told you to get married and get divorced?”

Many of the detainees wish to emigrate and live in a country that preserves their rights. Preserving our rights and compensating us materially and morally is what gives us justice, and I have no problem in presenting what I have said to court as a witness against this regime.



Nour<sup>9\*</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> - Nour (alias), interview with the author via WhatsApp, on: February 15, 2019, duration: 2 hours.

\*Cover By: Eyas Jaafar



eyas 2019



I am Nour from Aleppo, born in 1991. I enrolled in the Faculty of Shari'a and reached third year before I was arrested. After I was released, I was suspended from University due to my activities in the Syrian revolution. Before the revolution, due to my studies of Shari'a and my expertise in the Arabic language, I used to work as a teacher. I taught children the Quran and Arabic language in private institutes, but I was not affiliated with any Islamist groups, as I believe that these groups are framing religion, and religion is much broader than that.

I devoted myself and my time to teaching, only leaving home to teach or to go to university. I wasn't even active with my social obligations. The idea of me participating in the revolution was impossible, and nobody could have imagined it.

I started wearing the hijab in 5th grade, and in 8th grade I started wearing the niqab. My family objected strongly because I was too young; they are conservative but not strict, and the niqab in their point of view should not be a whim but a personal decision, not affected by someone else, and shouldn't be forced on a woman, as is happening in some areas of Aleppo where the niqab is not a reflection of religious commitment or personal conviction.

I decision to wear the niqab was of my own free will, and I was the only one in my family to do so! Since I was a child, I had the tendency to look for religious knowledge, and I liked visiting mosques. I was influenced by my teachers when I attended Shari'a elementary school in 7th grade, but I have a lot of veiled and also unveiled friends.

### **The beginning of the revolution**

In the beginning, I used to feel a "thrill" of excitement, affected by the atmosphere of youthful enthusiasm at university and the beginning of demonstrations and the chanting. So I used to join them, even though I thought that the President is a doctor and an educated person able to lead the country, and that under him the country developed.

While I was taking my exams in Damascus, I rented an apartment in Ruken al-Din with six female students from Aleppo. I remember a demonstration started one Friday and I witnessed them shooting at protesters, killing six of them. This happened directly opposite my house. I was deeply affected. I had some idea there was physical violence and arrests, but not that they went this far. After the funeral of the six deceased protesters, a curfew was imposed, but they gave us permission to leave because they recognized that we were from Aleppo from our black veils, unlike the colorful veils in Damascus. Aleppo was known as a pro-regime city with pro-regime marches. I remember that these incidents were in mid-July 2011.

When I returned to Aleppo I was very upset and affected, and I couldn't stand hearing any of the pro-regime chants. I had socialized with many girls from Daraa city and gained some perspective about the horror they had endured under several raids and arrests based on ID. Sometimes they used to escape to our house. I started to participate heavily in the

demonstrations, inside the university campus and later outside, and was encouraged by one of my professors who was martyred later. Many of our friends were arrested or died. I remember a guy called Anas Samouk who used to protect the women's marches. He died directly in front of me on 21 February 2012, and that is what led me to join humanitarian work and one of the charity organizations at the end of 2012.

### **Beginning humanitarian work**

Many displaced people were heading to regime areas, escaping the war and heavy shelling, and bringing huge numbers of people into Aleppo city. Most of them needed help and this required action by small organizations in providing help, food, and housing. My activity was largely in food aid with a private organization which was licensed and known to the regime, and a main condition [for its operation] was that families in regime areas should get aid equally to IDPs. Still, the organization warned us we could be subjected to arrest at any moment, and that the organization would be helpless if that happened and each of us was working there at their own peril.

For us, this was not surprising as there were continuous arrest campaigns every now and then, and all operating organizations were exposed to this. I was arrested with eighteen other people; we didn't know each other, and all of us were from licensed organizations in Aleppo operating in regime areas, who obtained permission from the regime before entering FSA areas.

### **The arrest**

Due to my previous work as a teacher, I was especially concerned for children, so I started working as a supervisor for orphans. I used to help receiving displaced orphans and including them with present orphans. After that, I got an offer from UNICEF to work in a project called "Small spaces", especially for orphans and homeless children, and everything related to children's problems. We were supposed to sign the contract on 19 August 2014, as the agreement between our organization and UNICEF was concluded orally, but on Friday 16 August 2014, the man who worked with me was arrested, and I didn't know about it, then the next morning I was arrested on 17 August 2014. A group of soldiers came to the building where I live with my family claiming they were looking for men to join the military, but I knew it was me they were looking for, because they headed directly towards my house of all the other houses in the building, owned wholly by my family. I had been expecting it to happen.

The Brigadier and the head of the investigation department came in in a civilized manner, they reassured my family that they would take me in for simple questioning and I would return in half an hour, saying I was their daughters' age, and that they would do me no harm and would treat me as their own.

They had asked me about a number of photos of some young people working in relief, whom I didn't know at that time, but I was afraid and refusing to go with them. They persuaded me after they asked me to leave with my hijab (niqab) on as usual, and to walk towards the car by myself. They didn't search the house, but they took my cell phone and my personal laptop because they saw them. I was not handcuffed but when I got in the car they asked me not to look at them or memorize their faces; they had told my family they were from the military security branch, but they didn't tell me that.

The car kept moving around the city for almost two hours for no reason, so I felt that they were trying to make me lose direction, but they did me no harm.

### **Entering the military security branch in Aleppo:**

We entered the military security branch in Aleppo, and there the treatment changed completely; they removed my hijab and ordered one of the [female] detainees to search me. They blindfolded me and I was taken into the interrogation room violently, then the interrogator started beating me and slapping me on the face, and kicking me on my legs, saying: "You opposition [people], how do you protest against the state? You hate the president when he is the one who provided free education, free healthcare in his hospitals, and ensured welfare for all of you!", without accusing me of any charges directly.

He beat me with "Lakhdar Brahimi", even pushing it against my neck and strangling me with it until I almost fainted, then he removed the blindfold and sat me down on the floor. The guy who used to work with me was brought in, I didn't know that he was arrested until that moment. He was a young boy, seventeen years old at the time, but he didn't recognize me because I was not wearing my niqab, and I did not recognize him because of the marks of his beating; [the interrogator] started beating him and asking him about my identity: "Who is she? Who is she?", and the guy was answering that he didn't know me, so I told the investigator that he doesn't know me without my niqab. The guy was shocked, he recognized me from my voice. He told the interrogator that he was working with me in the organization in relief work only, so he let him out. The interrogator started telling me that he did not want to see me in this situation, and if we hadn't protested in the first place we wouldn't need the relief work, and we would have been living our lives normally. "If you didn't protest this wouldn't have happened", and he was referring to the revolution as "your revolution".

I felt that they were treating us university students differently from other people, speaking to us more rationally, trying to convince us that the revolution was wrong and that we were influenced by the society around us, and we were just tools in their hands. We heard from the other female detainees about methods like threat of rape or intimidation, talking about killing their families and children. I felt they were trying to deliver a less violent image to us since we would go out and talk about what happened. The interrogation lasted for around two hours; all

this time I was holding up thinking that I was going home. Until the interrogator told me they would take me downstairs, and I said: "You did not accuse me of any charges, and the Brigadier told me I was going back home after half an hour." He told me that I was staying.

I thought they would put me in a solitary cell, but they took me into a room with seventeen other girls and women. Some women were coming in and others were going out. I did not speak because I was new, but I kept asking them about the one thing I was very afraid of, which was rape. This terrified me, and when they told me there was no raping I didn't believe them and thought they were trying to calm me down, but all of them agreed that there was no rape. I don't think that rape happens to the ones in the group rooms.

When we were taken to the toilets at eight o'clock in the morning I found a girl of my age crying. I tried to talk to her and console her. We talked for a while, I found out that she worked in humanitarian relief work too, and that they asked her about me in her interrogation and she told them that she didn't know me. Also, I learned that they had arrested all the people in the photos that they showed me and asked me about. Our charges were all the same, working in humanitarian relief.

The next day, the interrogations started, and the first charge against me was protesting. I denied it completely, so I wouldn't be forced to give the names of the people who were with me, even though I knew there was an amnesty for the protesters because of elections.

In every interrogation, the charges I was accused of were based on the confessions of the eighteen persons detained in the case, five females and thirteen males, beginning with demonstrating, distributing and smuggling medicine, medical work and field hospitals, and even exploding checkpoints. I didn't confess to anything despite the beating and violence, and I insisted I would not confess to something I didn't do. After 45 days of this, I and my four female colleagues were told we were going home, the interrogator told me personally that my case was clear and I was leaving. We were put on a bus, five girls and thirteen boys, handcuffed and blindfolded with our heads down in the bus.

### **The journey to Palestine Branch:**

The treatment inside the bus was extremely aggressive, between every two chairs sat a soldier, and we were subjected to verbal abuse and harassment by the soldiers, especially to females, with the aim of humiliating the male detainees by abusing their dignity and making them feel helpless towards us. I could hear the boys crying while we were insulted. I remember that one of the agents asked me about my studies and I answered Shari'a, so he said to me: "What do you know about jihad marriage? Is this what you study, jihad marriage?" I replied that there is nothing called jihad marriage. Then he told me they were from the Palestine branch. I couldn't control my terror and I screamed: "Why you're taking us to Palestine branch?" One of them

sitting in front became angry, he seemed to be the supervisor, and he told to me “shut up”, and started insulting me again with all the bad words they use “you this, you that”.

### **Palestine Branch:**

When we reached Palestine branch in Damascus and they “received” us as usual, they put the females in a room, and took the males to torture. We knew it from screaming we heard from the end of the stairs where they took them. When they returned they had different faces, meaning their faces had changed from the torture and blood, one of them was unconscious. After that, we delivered our belongings and this was that last time we were together in a group, the members of the same case.

We, the females, were left in a room for almost half an hour and then we were distributed each to a different cell of the available five cells, except for me and my friend, we were in the same cell, and we never saw the other girls again.

When we entered the cell, the first question we asked the female detainees about was rape.

Palestine Branch was the worst experience I have ever had in my life, even though I was not exposed to any beating or torture at all, but the psychological torture was much worse, and the worst was hearing the screams and groans around the clock. We heard the sounds of the males being tortured, coming from downstairs through the floor of the cell; when we lay down we could hear the screaming from the interrogation rooms on the same floor, where torture increases after ten o'clock at night.

When we went to the toilets it was usual to pass between the boys’ dead bodies. Hygiene was non-existent and the food was very bad; the military security branch in Aleppo was better in these aspects. It was a very awful experience in Palestine branch, even though I found out that I was in branch 235 which is the ‘mildest’ of the three Palestine branches.

It was rare to torture detainees transferred from another branch in Damascus to Palestine branch, because they “had had enough torture”, unless the investigator was not convinced by what they had said so they were tortured again using the same methods followed in other branches. But new detainees brought from Damascus or another province, entering this as the first branch, were tortured. For example, I remember a girl from Daraa province, the interrogator didn’t like her statement so he tortured her to make her confess to the charge he accused her of, which was luring soldiers, and she was a soft girl with a weak body and she couldn't handle the torture, so she confessed to what he wanted her to say in order to survive.

I also remember a girl from Damascus got pregnant while she was inside the branch, and she was in solitary confinement, and shortly before she gave birth she was transferred to Adra Central Prison, where she gave birth, and she is still in Adra prison as far as I know.

After five months in Palestine branch with no interrogation, they forced me to stamp my fingerprint on some white papers. It is usual for those who have their fingerprint stamped to be released, but I was returned to the cell, me and the girls who were with me in the same case. I stayed there for three months and ten days, and after that I was transferred to Adra prison on February 14, 2015, and my belongings were confiscated.

### **Transfer to Adra prison:**

I reached Adra prison and remained there until March 03, 2015 before I was transferred to the judge of the terrorism court. When I was brought before him, he asked me to bring paper proof that I was working with a licensed organization, and that I wouldn't be released without this paper, and I returned to Adra.

In Adra prison visits were allowed, I was able to call my mother, although I was afraid of involving her because of that call, to inform her about my condition and location. I didn't stop crying while I was talking to her. After that, my family hired a lawyer for me and came to visit me several times and brought me clothes. They suffered a lot from the difficulty in transportation between Aleppo and Damascus at that time.

I remained in Adra for almost six months, committal period, then I was released after the lawyer provided papers that prove I was working with a licensed organization. I was released on 19 October 2015. Exit is by patrol which takes the detainees and drops them in the town, the center of Adra. But they didn't stamp my hand even though I told them about it, but they didn't care. With me in the patrol were girls wanted at Branch 251, and they took me off with them by mistake, even though I had my release paper with me! When I got to the branch they told me I was not wanted but they couldn't let me go like that so I had to stay, and I stayed in the branch for seven days. My family knew that I had been released from Adra, but they didn't know where I was.

In this branch, I was trying to advise the female detainees, from my experience, about what they should and should not say while in interrogation, and it appears they saw me through the cameras so they transferred me to a cell with 110 female detainees there for exchange.

After that, I left this branch and there was a girl with me so I communicated with my parents through her. My parents had been looking for me. I remained in Damascus for five days until I completed my "drop search" documents, then I left to Aleppo.

### **Relationship with family and society:**

Since I was a child, my father has given us, my siblings and I, the freedom to make our own choices and strengthen our personalities. Although he was against the idea of me working with humanitarian organizations, even if they were licensed, believing this was of no importance to

the regime, he told me it was my decision in the end. After I was released from detention, my family took very good care of me, supporting me and standing by my side, they were understanding and didn't ask me any inappropriate questions, and I told them what happened with me freely. We became even closer than before, my relationship with my father especially became stronger even though he believed my decision had been wrong, but he told me that it was in the past and I should return to my studies and move on with my life.

I was engaged before my detention, but it wasn't the same between us after my release, I felt a coldness in the relationship, he couldn't stand the idea that I was a detainee so we broke up. After that, there were two scenarios repeated every time someone approached me for marriage: either the man was a rebel with the idea he should marry a former detainee to protect her honor as a torture victim, and by that he is supporting the revolution, and some of them prefer a raped detainee in particular; or a person distant from the revolution, who could not accept the idea of me being a former detainee and considered it shameful.

I think both of them marginalize the female detainee; I need to be married to a man who sees me as I am and accepts me as a person, someone I can talk to about what I was subjected to and to be confident that he will accept it.

I see that I came out of this experience with minimal loss, although it was a painful experience for me, but it was more painful and difficult for my family because they didn't know where I was or what had become of me, and they were afraid for me all through my detention period. I learned to get over a lot of problems; every time I face a problem I remember that I got over one that was much bigger.

### **Travel to Turkey:**

My family suffered a lot during my detention period because of false news they received about me. When I was released they were afraid for me, so they quickly worked on sending me to Turkey. I was supposed to go for three months as a trial, and I then either accept the idea and stay, or consider it a recovery period. In the beginning, despite the difficulty of being away from my family, especially that I had been away from them while I was detained, I forced myself to accept the new situation, especially as there was a potential relationship in Turkey. But this didn't go through, and when my family visited me here they found the situation was hard for me, and saw that my staying alone in a foreign country with a foreign language, while I was still in shock, was not suitable; and with the risk of my going back to Syria, they decided we should all stay together in Turkey.

When I first came to Turkey, I worked with a relief organization for six months, and when my contract ended I got a new offer in another state. I couldn't leave my family, so I refused it and I haven't worked since.

I would like to highlight a case that female refugees suffer from here in Turkey; there are many female survivors being trafficked by taking advantage of their need, employing them in prostitution or masked prostitution, where they are given in marriage for limited periods for an agreed amount of money in return.

### **The difference in the detention experience between men and women:**

Society gives itself the right to ask a female detainee if she was raped or not, and that doesn't happen to a male detainee, it's harder for women in this aspect. In my personal opinion, detention is harder on men than women, because they are exposed to much more physical violence, and longer detention periods, and might be exposed to sexual violence as well and raped too; as for women, with all violence she is exposed to, the problem is still mainly with rape.

### **Final word:**

What I lived through during detention makes me wish that every person who contributed to these criminal actions is exposed to the same things we were exposed to, but without God granting him the patience that He granted us. I want a court to be established to investigate these criminals, and I will bring a lawsuit against them if I get the chance, even though I know this is hopeless, as despite all the documenting efforts nothing has happened in the absence of international support for this issue. I wish to document my experience because I think everyone should know what is happening and what male/female detainees are exposed to, I am not ashamed of saying that I was detained to anyone, even if society rejects me; society here in Turkey views detainees in a supportive way, not with pity or aversion as in Syrian society, and perhaps my documentation will contribute simply in highlighting what my colleagues still in detention are suffering.



## Last woman in Qaboun:10\*

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<sup>10</sup> - Ward (alias), interview with the author via Skype, on February 16, 2019, duration: 3.15 hours.

\*Cover By: Milad Amin



I am Ward from al-Qaboun neighborhood in Damascus. I am forty-three years old.

I was sixteen years old when I got married. I have three sons, Muhammad, Ramiz, and Maher; Muhammad and Maher are detained, Ramiz and I are currently in Turkey.

I have a 9<sup>th</sup> grade certificate, I studied at the Institute of Sport and Fitness and have a little experience in physiotherapy. I worked with a doctor for five years in a clinic, then alone for fifteen years. I also gave physiotherapy and liposuction sessions in a sports club.

In the beginning, I was working to feed my children. My husband was sick and couldn't work because of epileptic seizures. Often, the attacks came on the street, and people would bring him home after those seizures. Because of the dizziness and seizures, our relatives, friends, and neighbors decided that he should stay at home for his own safety.

In addition to my husband's medical situation, his behavior was difficult. I suffered a lot with him; he didn't know how to raise his children, he didn't help me with the housework, the marriage and life with him was not comfortable. At the beginning of our marriage he locked me in the house and I didn't dare to go out. Even after the birth of my oldest son Muhammad, my husband insulted me and beat me when I went out of the house, and his mother was even more severe than him.

I was young and afraid of them, but after my second pregnancy I wanted a divorce, and I made myself miscarry by carrying heavy things and jumping; the baby died inside me in the fourth month of pregnancy. I know now what I did, but I was young and I was suffering and didn't realize what I was doing. I regretted it after a while.

My mother would calm me down, she didn't want me to "ruin" my life and didn't want me to be divorced. She had also suffered during her marriage to my father, and she wanted me to raise my children and not to leave them, and to be patient with my husband the way she was patient.

After two years of miscarriage, I was pregnant again with my son Maher. My relationship with my husband was getting worse, but I had matured and learned how to defend myself. I learned to say no when I wanted, instead of yes.

I changed, and started looking for a job because our financial situation was terrible. My mother used to take care of all my family's needs in terms of food, housekeeping, and taking care of my children. She was old and my brothers were children; the age difference between my son and my brother was only two years.

I made the decision that my family and I wouldn't be dependent on my mother anymore. My husband began putting more pressure on me and thought I was becoming more stubborn and no longer obeyed or feared him. My task was to bring him medicine so that his health condition wouldn't worsen, and his treatment of me become worse.

My sister-in-law, who is an actress, tried to help me by persuading my husband to allow me to train to be a hairdresser. She told him that my knowledge of the profession might help us travel to Dubai and work there, so he allowed me to go and learn the profession in a salon. I was

pregnant with my third child, Ramiz. My personality became much stronger after work, and I began to know what I wanted and how I could change my life and my reality.

As I entered the ninth month of pregnancy, I was thinking about going back to work after I gave birth and the difficulties I would face. My mother supported me and stood by my side. I managed to go back to work in the salon one month after a cesarean section. All my sons were born by cesarean, because of an accident I had had when I was a child that broke my pelvis. I used to leave my little boy with my mother and go to work, and I felt that I was rebuilding my life.

My husband couldn't control my life anymore. I rebelled against him, and I said to him, "Whether you like this or not, no one is holding you." He felt that I had changed so he surrendered to reality, but our fights were constant. He beat me, but in the end I did what I wanted. I did not worry anymore when my husband complained to my brothers because I had decided to change my life.

In 2003, I put my sons Mohammed and Maher in Quraysh orphanage school so I could go to work. I provided them with papers stating that my husband was sick and not working. I needed to work and I didn't have a safe place to leave my children. I used to bring them home every Thursday and take them back to the orphanage on Saturday, and my son Ramiz who was two years old stayed with me.

I couldn't find a job easily. I cleaned a pharmacy three days a week without my family's knowledge. The pharmacy owner gave me 500 Syrian Pounds a day, which was more than enough to support my children and I didn't need any help from anyone.

I kept looking for another job in the newspapers that came to the pharmacy.

I wanted to improve myself, and one time I read an advertisement looking for a secretary to work for a cardiologist. The doctor interviewed me and hired me. He thought in a way that was practical. He sought projects that brought money. He liked the way I spoke and dealt with patients, I learned a lot from my work at the salon.

I learned a lot in the clinic, I even helped him with electrocardiograms. Six months later, the doctor transferred me to work at his center for slimming in Duma area. My responsibilities expanded and customers started coming because of me. Some of them asked about me in person. I lasted in this job for three years. The doctor (owner of the center) was taking advantage of me. My work brought the center 500,000 Syrian Pounds a month, but my salary was only 5,000 pounds; I was working from 9 in the morning until 9 at night. But I was happy, and my two oldest sons were at school and my youngest son Ramiz in kindergarten.

The center became my second home and I didn't want to go back home.

I persuaded the doctor to open another branch in our neighborhood Qaboun. I became responsible for the new branch. Since I am a local of the area, and most of the women knew me, the center started working in its first week of opening, as the customers were already ready. I was very tired at work and noticed that I was working hard and someone else was

getting the results of my work, so I decided to register in a course and obtain a certificate to open my own sports center.

I started from zero, bought a pickup vehicle with my brother. Which helped me save 150,000 Syrian Pounds. I withdrew my money from my brother and told him that I wanted to open my own project. I rented from my mother an apartment she owned and rented out. The rest of the money, the first payment of the machines and equipment, I bought in installments.

The location of the apartment was far from the center of Qaboun, but my customers advertised it and helped it start working very quickly and from the first day. Thank God, my mother and my clients were delighted, but they started asking me to move the center closer because the journey was far away for them. In 2010, I rented an apartment in a strategic neighborhood in town in Qaboun.

I moved my equipment, and within three days I started working again, but my husband had started making more problems for me, and in 2011 I brought a case to separate from my husband.

Work at the center began to decline at the beginning of the revolution in 2011, but I was able to tell my children. Thank God, my son Muhammad had obtained his baccalaureate, but he wanted to take his exams over in order to get higher grades that would enable him to enroll in university, but he later left his studies and made an urgent request to join the army. I said, "My son, why do you want to go to the army?" He replied, "I have a duty and I want to go".

### **The story of my son Mohammad**

At the begging of the revolution, peaceful demonstrations were frequent and many were martyred. Among them friends of my son, so he decided to join the regime's army so he undergoes a two-month training course, learn how to use a weapon and then defect with his weapon. I couldn't stop him, so I let him do what he wanted, after all we didn't know what was going to happen!

The duration of the course was three months and my son didn't have leaves to come home. So I visited him every day because the course was in Kadam area, which is close to us. Then he was dispatched to as-Suwayda governorate, and was bribing his commanding officer for leaves.

He used to take his leaves on Thursdays and Fridays, where he comes home to participate in Friday demonstrations and then back to his post on Saturday. He had a good relationship with his commanding officer, who even gave him the leave ledger, so he can sign and leave whenever he wanted.

One week was the Prophet's birthday (Mawlid al-Nabi) and also valentine's day, my son came from as-Suwayda on Thursday and wanted to see his cousin whom he was in love with. They couldn't arrange to meet except on Sunday, meaning he will not return to his post on Saturday. And he didn't return and told me it's a holiday and no one will notice his absence. I pressed

him to return but he refused, saying that he agreed with his and they will call him in any case of emergency so he could immediately return to his post. He added: "Even if they don't call me, worst case scenario is imprisonment for sixteen days," I couldn't argue with him and even if I did he will do as he pleases.

Of course, his friends called and told him to come immediately, but he refused to return on Saturday, and so he was imprisoned and interrogated. The interrogation was harsh because my son's civil record was from Duma, since his father is from Duma and I'm from Qaboun.

The interrogator was cruel. He struck my son with metal chair and broke his back and two hands. He was thrown in a cell and not medicated. I was communicating with his friends asking about him since he left his sim card with me and I didn't know what was happening with him. Six days later, his friends managed to see him but he was semi-unconscious in the cell, his face was yellow, his body temperature was burning up and couldn't stand on his feet. They informed his commanding officer who had a good relation with about his situation, so he transferred him to the hospital where he remained in intensive care for five days. After he woke up, he called me and asked me to come take him home. He cannot move because of the fractures.

A female general refused to give him his ID card so I could get him out of the hospital, and told us that we would get it the next day. When I arrived at the hospital on the next day, he called me and said that he was released and was given a five days leave. I replied: "no problem, I'm taking you tomorrow to Tishreen hospital, where we can get you a new and long leave." In the hospital he was examined and I was told that his condition is very bad, so we managed to obtain approval for a fifteen-day leave, and on the thirteenth day, I told him: "I will not let you go back to the army, and you will not execute your plan," and I meant his plan to defect since it became an impossible option. He replied: "How come you don't want me to get back? They will arrest my father, my brothers and maybe burn down our house!" I told him I will take care of it.

Sleeper cells in Qaboun had begun to form, young men began to join factions, raids were in its infancy, and the area had not been yet besieged.

Leader of the groups was my cousin. Early February 2012, I called him and told him that I don't want to send my son Mohammad back to the army, and he asked me to think carefully before making this decision. I told him: "it is settled, and I'd rather him be killed in front of me than killed there when I know nothing about him." At 2.00 am, my cousin came and took him. Three hours after the end of his leave, I called his friends at the military post and asked: "I want to check on Mohammad, did he arrive?" they said no. Three hours later, the officer in charge of his post called me asking: "where is your son?" I replied: "I took him to the garage and he got in the Suwayda bus in front of me and left, he should be with you now, and he left his phone with me because it needs repairs," I started crying and asked him: "what did you do to my son?" he replied: "maybe the armed groups took him. Go to the military security branch next to

Tishreen hospital and report that your son is missing.” The next morning, I filed a report out of fear for my children and their father. The commanding officer called me every few days, asking me about my son and telling me: “sister, if your son is a deserter, we will get him. No one will touch him and he will be sent back to his post.” After a while they stopped calling.

Demonstrations and raids continued, and fifteen days later I checked on my son. I was told that I must not use his real name when checking on him, but use the name they gave him “Radwan.” The group he was with was watched by some informant, and on April 2012, three months after his leave, a patrol surrounded and raided one of the farms in al-Adawi area where my son’s group was staying. He was with a group of twenty-one people staying in that farm. Eleven escaped and the rest arrested. No one knows who died and who was injured during this raid and my son was among those whose fate was unknown. Two months later I knew that he was injured and taken by the patrol. Two years later I learned that one of those who were arrested have been released after his family paid money to get him out. But for my son, I haven’t heard anything about him until this day.

### **My son Maher’s arrest**

At the beginning of the revolution in October 2011, when my fourteen-year-old son Maher was on his way home, he saw an Opel car driving around the streets to suppress the demonstrations. He ran towards a women's demonstration and told them: "Security, security". Security forces saw him and arrested him. They accused him of financing demonstrations; the 14-year-old was funding demonstrations!!! It’s laughable.

A month after his arrest, a relative, who was married to an officer, helped him and got him out of prison, but he was sick and suffering from scabies and had burns and scars on his body. He was arrested again in November 2012, and until today I don’t know anything about him.

### **Last Woman in Qaboun**

Work at our center stopped due to increased bombing of Qaboun and people becoming displaced. When the Red Crescent opened a center in our area, I joined it for four months to assist them in nursing. At the same time, in secret, I changed my center's equipment and work [scope] to provide physiotherapy to the injured. I asked a doctor in Qaboun to help me and learned from him how to sew wounds and treat injuries.

Qaboun was closed, and all its people were displaced, but I stayed and helped the doctors in the field hospital, along with my work in the center.

In 2013, it became difficult for women to give birth or to be treated or vaccinate their children. So I brought a midwife to my center and provided a room for obstetrics, and in emergency cases one of the town’s notables would call the security [agents] and ask them to stop the snipers shooting until his patient was transferred to a hospital outside the area to give birth.

The military escalation continued and my mother and my little son Ramiz fled out of the besieged area of Qaboun. I stayed behind alone with my brother, who was later martyred. My brother had a car which we used to transport the wounded.

On 19 June 2013, a tank stopped on the highway and started shelling at civilians in my neighborhood. My brother and I started to help those wounded under the heavy shelling, but the number was huge. People were running around us fleeing in all directions. A group of young people told my brother: "The tank is shelling, we should go to it Muhammad". He left the ambulance and took a shotgun and went towards it and began to shoot at it while it was bombing in his direction, and he was killed, may his soul rest in peace. I remained alone, and continued to do my work in spite of the siege.

My center was destroyed by bombs, it was in a very sensitive location, in the sniper's direct line of vision. I couldn't work anymore. The men were making huge holes in the walls of the houses, to allow people to move through them [undetected] from house to house, escaping the sniper, who became known as the "the shots", thus opening the roads to houses and also opening the way to my center.

The "elders" [*dignitaries*] of the area decided to negotiate with the regime so that women and children could leave the besieged area. And indeed, only the men were left.

I was the only woman who stayed behind even though they insisted I [should leave], but I refused. I had a cause and I wanted to work for it; I couldn't leave the wounded. We remained under siege for about ten months, with shells "raining" on us.

I remained in my area Qaboun because I have faith and because my people were in a crisis; they needed my help, I had to help, it was impossible to leave them.

After my brother's martyrdom, I tried to help most of his wounded friends. I felt that if I left them it would be as if I had left my children. The majority of them were later martyred, may their souls rest in peace.

During the siege, one of the young men proposed to me. His name was R.L and he was nicknamed "the good heart". He loved me very much and loved my work.

I had previously rejected the idea of marriage because my main concern was to find out any news about my detained children. But because I was the only woman in Qaboun, the young people insisted I should be married, and after several attempts I agreed to marry him, at the beginning of 2014.

He was a fighter and wanted by the regime. He repeatedly asked me to marry him. Even before the siege, he used to send to me through my brother of his wish to marry me, and asked my brother: "What are your sister's needs? I will give her whatever she needs. I want to marry her in good faith".

My brother tried to convince me repeatedly and I continued to refuse. My husband would help me and accompany me during my work, both before and after our marriage. He used my brother's car to transport the wounded.



I learned a lot from the doctors, and I worked as a nurse. We faced circumstances where I would help the doctors even while performing surgery, because there was no one specialized. We had five doctors, but after the siege only three were left, two specialists and a medical student who hadn't graduated.

During the siege most of our food was bulgur, lentils, and rice; we did not care about food, we only ate to satisfy our hunger. We ground barley, rice, and corn to make bread. "Our baked bread was not edible." We lived for several days on soup, we had no milk or meat, we remained like this for a whole year, and after that a truce was reached. They opened Barzeh road for us. Not everyone could leave, there was a tight security check on the people who were going out. I went out immediately after the road was opened, "like a trapped bird who wanted to see its family and friends". I visited my mother and my son, I bought some of the things we needed and I returned. The checkpoint did not allow us to bring everything in; we were not allowed to take semolina or citric acid, only a bundle of bread, vegetables, cheese, one kilo of sugar, and one kilo of rice; only one kilo was allowed.

I went out every day and sometimes every two days to get our needs. I repaired the center, went back to work, and started bringing crutches for the injured and wheelchairs for the elderly. Once an agent at the checkpoint asked me, "Who are those wheelchairs for?" I answered: "for my disabled mother-in-law, may God take her". I used to try to laugh and joke my way through the checkpoints, and thank God I managed to pass through easily. I met doctors who were giving away medicines, as donations, and I used to smuggle them under my clothes into Qaboun.

I stayed there for a year and a half. I would put whatever I needed at the bottom of the bags and cover them with underwear on top, and the soldier at the checkpoint would be embarrassed while searching through them, and so I would pass.

### **The story of my injury**

At the beginning of 2013, two months before my brother was martyred, the situation escalated under the siege and a sniper started targeting Red Crescent ambulances. I was working with them at the time. The Red Crescent [workers] had refused to go out to bring one of the wounded because several times they had been targeted by the sniper. I told them I was ready to bring him. When I got to an area full of olive trees, bullets began to fly towards me. I was visible to the snipers, but I didn't know where they were located. I was injured. I couldn't go back or forwards. I ran into a corner to protect myself, but one of them shot me in the shoulder, and the bullet entered from the front and went out my back. I thought I would die, I started praying, but I didn't die. I took my phone out of my bag, and laid on it and called him and told him: "I am injured, I couldn't reach the wounded man", he told me: "me and the boys will come to you." I warned him not to come because the area was under siege. I said to him: "I will try to return to you", but I was sure I would die, I was bleeding and couldn't feel pain

anymore, and I told myself if I did not move I would die of bleeding and if I moved they would shoot me. Life is precious.

I stood up after hearing a voice in one of the nearby buildings. One of my friends used to live there. The bullets started flying towards me again, but I wasn't hit. I went into the building where the voices were louder and screamed for help. Fifteen security men came towards me, and one of them said: "Sir, sir, she's injured".

I realized that I wouldn't survive them. They took me to one of the apartments on the third floor. My brother called me and began cursing one of the officers. He told him that he would come to take me. The officer replied that he would take my dead body and started cursing my brother, and broke my mobile phone. My other phone rang and it was my brother's friend, who was later martyred, one of the officers took my phone and answered it, and the caller apologized to the officer and said to him "I trust you with my sister, I thought she fell into the hands of the armed groups." He asked him to help me. The officer seemed to believe my brother's friend, but another officer said, "He is a liar and an armed man." The two officers started fighting with each other. One of them wanted to arrest me and the other wanted to help me.

In the meantime, my son called one of my relatives and told her about my injury and that I am in the hands of the security forces. She called her husband's uncle, who he had a good relationship with some officers. So one of his friends contacted those who arrested me, and told them I went through this area by mistake and I know nothing about what is going on there. Immediately, they took me downstairs to help me with my injuries. My brother brought some young men from the FSA to take me, and both sides clashed, but one of the security officers put me in a taxi and sent me with an agent to al-Mojtahed Hospital. I started to lose consciousness due to the bleeding, but the agent tried to keep me awake and poured water on my face. When I arrived at the hospital, I was taken to the intensive care room. I stayed there for five days, then they transferred me to another room. When the 4<sup>th</sup> Division came to the hospital, someone wrote in my file that no one should interfere with me, especially the other security branches, so I won't escape.

One of the doctors at the hospital took care of me because he was a friend of my brother's. He did not know me personally, but I remembered him, I knew from his accent that he was from Qaboun. My relationship with him became excellent and I convinced to come back with me and work in my center. After thirteen days, I couldn't stay any longer in the hospital, I begged him to allow me to leave. He agreed and said "I will get your papers but you will leave at your own risk." I agreed, but while he was preparing my papers, he heard someone speaking to the Air Force intelligence branch and asking them to come and take me, because the 4<sup>th</sup> Division wanted to arrest me. The doctor returned and told me: "I have to get you out of here, in any way possible". But I did not want to involve him in my case, so I called my relative again, whose uncle helped me before, and told her my story, and she asked me to wait, and said she

would contact me and asked me not to run away and stay in my place so the charge wouldn't be proven against me. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division came and took me to the Air Force intelligence branch, and questioned me all day long, and in the evening they released me.

Their questions during the investigation were all about: How did I get into a besieged area? Was I opening a way for the armed man? And I denied everything. I knew from my relative that there was nothing against me and everything was okay, so I insisted on my story, that I was [living] in Damascus outside Qaboun and didn't know what was happening inside Qaboun. They also asked me who I was talking to on the phone when I was injured, they thought I had called the FSA to come and fight them. I told them that I called my brother to rescue me and that a dog had shot me. I said "I am a helpless woman, and you can check my phone calls and listen to them". Then a phone call came for the officer who was investigating me, "Sir, she called her brother to rescue her and didn't call her the armed men". Then he told me to leave, so I was brave and said "Is it reasonable to bring me from the hospital with no charges against me?" He replied: "Go away from here, and don't you ever go to those places." I held my tongue and said to myself "it's better to leave alive" and went to my family's home in Qaboun, on the border of the besieged area.

### **My detention**

On 17 October 2015, I went with my sister to the Khaja market to get some things, and we were stopped by a patrol with three young men, they asked me about my name and my husband's name. There was a report indicating that I was married to an armed man, a "striker", which means one who strikes planes. My sister was very scared. We gave them our ID cards, and they dragged us to an office they had in an area close to the municipality, they returned my sister's ID to her and asked her to leave. They told her that they wanted me for a quarter of an hour. I asked them to let her wait for me, but as soon as I got the chance I winked at her to leave, I did not want her to be hurt because of me, but she didn't leave. The officer told her: "Go and bring 250,000 Syrian pounds to let you and your sister go, before I transfer your sister to one of the security branches".

My sister knew that transferring me to one of the security branches meant that I would never leave, as had happened to my two sons. So she went out and called my older brother and told him the story. He gave her the money, but she didn't let him come near the area where I was. She returned and gave the money to the officer, he took the money and put it in the drawer, and said to her: "Get out of here, or I will write a report saying that you were trying to bribe me, and put you and your sister in separate rooms, and rape both of you". At that moment, my sister didn't want to take me or want the money that she had paid, she just wanted to run away quickly from there. She begged the officer to let her go out, she left after he made her sign on a blank piece of paper, and told her not to tell anyone anything or he would cut her tongue out.

My sister told my brother what happened and she said to him: "Wash your hands of it, she will never leave".

I stayed in the place until the evening. They searched me and questioned me. They continued to threaten me and verbally abuse me. Then they transferred me to the Air Force Intelligence branch in the Mazzeh area. In the open office, they took my data, searched me and photographed me. At eleven o'clock at night, they put me in a solitary cell, with no light, and I saw a black pile inside and was afraid to move closer. I thought it was a pile of dead bodies. I squatted on the ground and began to gather my thoughts preparing myself for the interrogation. In the morning, light started to come in from a hole in the wall at the top of the room. I discovered that the black pile was two blankets full of lice, smelling awful, and I didn't dare touch them.

After a while, I don't know exactly what time, one of them pushed open the door and gave me a loaf of bread, a piece of potato and one cucumber. "I threw them in his face and said, "I do not want to eat. I want to get out of here." He answered me threateningly and cursed me with bad words. "You will scream when you're deprived of food". I said to him: "Go to hell, you and your food", and started to curse him then he closed the door and left.

At the end of the day, they blindfolded me and took me to one of the officers to interrogate me. I was scared, and afraid for my brothers, and on my way to the officer, they were mocking me, saying: "She was with the armed men inside, flirting with all of them, practicing sexual jihad." I didn't understand the meaning of the word 'sexual jihad'!

In the beginning, the officer spoke to me quietly. He asked me about my name and told me: "You are our secretariat, and the President will issue a general amnesty at the end of the year, so whatever you say, you will be released. Tell me everything, because you didn't carry arms". I replied: "I didn't carry arms and I will not carry arms against my people, I just worked in humanitarian work." He told me he will let me rest a little. He asked me to reconsider before the interrogations. They brought me back to the cell, and in the evening they brought me food and I started to arrange my thoughts so I could talk about things that brought them on my side and in order not to harm myself or anyone else.

The third day morning, they took me to another officer, not the one who had talked to me before, this officer was harsh and greeted me with offensive and abusive words (may God never forgive him for those words), the least of which was "you whore, you were with the militias, [*expletive*] with each one of them, and finally bitch you fell in our hands", and he said a lot of words that I am ashamed to repeat. He spoke in the accent of the coastal region. He kept me in front of him for five hours. I didn't know what I was answering. He was beating and kicking me, and my hands were tied behind my back and I was blindfolded. He told me to stand on one foot. He brought several civil registers belonging to young men from Qaboun, and asked me to identify them. I didn't give him the names of the men who were alive, I gave him names and nicknames of the dead, like Abu so-and-so, and he said: "you bitch, I asked

you about his name, not his nickname". I said I did not know their names, I know them by their nicknames. Then he gave me my husband's civil register, after covering his name, but his picture was an old one from when he was fourteen years old, and I didn't recognize him. I knew that my husband was wanted by them, he had told me himself, and was always telling me since we were married: "If you are arrested, throw all the blame on me, don't take the blame."

My arrest had been very likely because I used to go in and out of the besieged area. During the interrogation, the officer insisted and repeated: "who is this?" I answered him: "I swear to God I don't know him", so he started cursing God and me, and he brought a stick and started hitting me on my hands. I couldn't swear anymore because of the bad words he was cursing God with. He asked me, "What is the name of your husband's father and mother?" I answered him correctly, and he quickly insulted me and said, "This is your husband who put his [*expletive*] inside you, how can you not know your husband!" I told him, "I know my husband, who is forty years old, I don't know him as a child, and I would be proud of him if I knew him and I would tell you". The officer started beating and insulting me, until I fell on the floor and lost consciousness. They left me on the floor, and when I came to I didn't find anyone in the room, but it was equipped with cameras, and as I stood up he came back and started kicking me and insulting me with the same bad words, he kept me standing for long hours, then they took me back to the cell. I stayed like this for thirteen days, the interrogation was repeated once or twice daily, and they forced me to stand for long hours.

They called me by my husband's name at the Air Force intelligence branch, because he used to shoot at planes. He struck down two of the regime's planes. Calling me by my husband's name didn't upset me, and I told them: "my husband struck down planes, but these planes were bombing our kids, you hit a school with two rockets, my son was inside it, he's injured, not dead, but other children died, I am proud of my husband, the planes were bombing us, not protecting us". I said all of that with no fear, and while I said it he was beating me brutally. They accused me of transporting explosive devices to Damascus and smuggling things to the armed men and helping them. In the beginning I denied, but later I confessed that I smuggled in materials for the wounded, not for the armed men, and I added, "I worked only in humanitarian work and I don't regret it".

Once I said I don't regret it they started beating and insulting me. After the thirteen days they took me to another interrogation room, I pulled down the blindfold and saw detained people standing in the corridor and in front of the walls in only their underwear. One of them was fat, the color of his skin was white, and he had dark blue bruises all over his body from the severity of the torture, as well as blood. I stood for a long time at the interrogator's door, waiting, and when I entered, he asked me to recount my last statements. I felt that he was in a high position, so I answered him "I have nothing else to say." He told me to go out for ten minutes to think. I entered again, and he asked me: "I have no choice but to say you were entering and leaving

the area, can it be that when you were leaving you didn't plant explosives and bombs in Damascus?!" I answered him: "Harming people is not forgiven by God", and I repeated my previous statements.

Then they transferred me to a group cell with twenty-two women, three meters by three meters space. Inside it, there was a toilet, a water tap, and a heater to heat the water. I stayed there for four months and it was horrible, cold with no blankets, bad food, sleeping on the floor, most of the detainees were sick and forgotten, each of them had been detained for years, between two and four years. Some of them left the branch and were transferred to Adra prison, and then were returned. They were young. Only one and another were accused. The rest were there because of a wanted man in their families. One of them from Qadam was sixty years old, she was with her daughters; her son was in the Nusra Front and they told her that she won't be released unless her son hands himself in or dies. Her son was in Qaboun, he was later killed, after my release.

During the interrogation, I heard the screams of detainees being tortured with electricity, by burning them and pulling out their nails. The officer threatened me that he would torture me with electricity, just as they tortured them. Thank God he didn't electrocute me, he beat me with a wooden stick and with his hands, one time he hit me on my chin and broke my teeth, and from the intensity of the beating, I fell again on one of the tables and broke my front teeth too.

There was a hole in the door of my cell covered with bread bags, I used to remove it when I heard any movement, and several times I saw children following their mothers to the bathroom. In the times when detainees go out to the bathroom, the jailer was counting one to three, and telling them to take off their clothes. Those who were late couldn't go in, and were told to kneel and they started beating them after pouring water on them, I heard their screams constantly.

We were allowed to go to the bathroom twice a day, in the morning and evening, and if we exceed our stay, we women more than a minute, the jailer would hit the door; but for young men he would count to ten, if the detainee stayed longer he beat him, unbearable beating. I was sad, because of what happened to the young men, once I heard a detainee screaming and asking for help, then total silence, then the jailer said: "He's dead, get me another one". It is impossible to forget these moments; I remember my children were tortured this way. I remember when my fourteen-year-old son Maher told me that during his first detention the jailer said to him while he was torturing him: "five men died at my hands, you will be the fifth". My two sons are detained and I don't know anything about them until now.

Due to the miserable conditions in the cell, I began to ask for blankets, food, and heating. I knocked on the door of the cell to take us out and improve our situation. Our loud voices were heard outside the prison because our room in the Air Force Intelligence was on the side of the main road, and we used to see the roundabout when they took us out to breathe. So they

punished us, and took us to the ground floor room, with young men inside it, taken in the green buses. We were allowed to go to the bathroom every five days, and the toilet twice daily, in the morning and evening. We were twenty-three women, and we were given fifteen minutes to take a shower. Our conditions became worse, and I couldn't take it anymore, I was fighting with the other detainees a lot. One of them said to the agent: "We don't want to stay in this cell". They transferred me and three detainees to a very small cell that was one and a half meters long and one meter wide. We slept on our sides and bent our legs at an angle. I stayed there for twenty days, making trouble with the agents every day because they treated us badly and abused us verbally.

One day my eighteen-year-old prison mate got sick, she had diarrhea and was vomiting, and she wanted to go to the bathroom. I put my hand out of the hole in the cell door, this movement meant we wanted something, but the jailer, who knew I was a troublemaker, didn't respond and said: "I swear I will come and break your hand". I said: "If you want to break it or not, come and open the door, the girl wants to go to the toilet."

The argument continued between us, and he threatened me saying: "I swear I will torture you severely". I said to him: "I am not afraid of you or the prison, or your master, I will complain against all of you that you are treating us badly." I threatened to complain because a committee that was conducting an inspection told us not to stay quiet when there was a complaint. He answered: "Do whatever you want, I swear I will beat you". The girls around me tried to calm me down, and told me: "Shut up, or they might do something to you", but I couldn't keep quiet when I saw the girls crying and our situation was so difficult because of the illness and the cold. I used to see a woman, sixty years old, crying constantly. She was sick with diabetes and she was asking them to give her medicine and asking them to let her go to the toilet, she urinated on herself. I screamed and said: "The woman is your mother's age, is it acceptable not to let her use the toilet?". He answered: "It's not your business bitch", until the head of the group cells came and asked me, "Why are you not obeying the rules, screaming and inciting the girls against us?" I said to him, "I want to complain".

This man was gentle with us, and he started to calm me down and said: "forgive us, we don't want problems". One of the officers heard us while he was passing by, and he asked me what I wanted. I told him I want to complain to the head of the branch, and all the women in all the cells started knocking on the doors. They saw that I had dared to speak and decided that I shouldn't be alone, so they went crazy and started knocking on the doors. At this moment the agents became afraid, and the head of the branch came, and they told him that the prisoner Ward is doing this. He screamed and cursed and told them to bring me. I was afraid, and I imagined that they would torture me, and they took me to his room.

I said to him, "they bring tea and won't let us use the toilet, we didn't dare to eat or drink, they treat us like animals, and verbally abuse us, aren't we people of this country? You used to tell

us that we were your secretariat, why you are treating us like this?" The officer was quiet, and asked me, "What's your charge?" I replied: "Dealing with armed men, funding, and more." I started counting my charges which were five or more, and he said: "all these charges, and you still have the nerve to speak?" I told him: "I have the rights of a prisoner, and I demand we are treated as human beings." He asked me, "Do you have the right to be treated as human beings? What are your requests?" I replied, "Treat us as human beings." The head of the charge answered, "Sir, leave her to me, I guarantee that she won't do anything anymore", so the head of the branch said: "As long as you are guaranteed by Abu Hibas, we will forgive you this time, but this is the last time, and your punishment is to give shots to the prisoner when needed" (painkillers and needles for diabetes patients).

Two days later, at six in the morning, the cell door opened and the same agent I fought with said, "You, get your things and come" In truth, I was afraid and suspicious, because the staff hadn't arrived yet, I was afraid he would do something. He took me back to the first cell I was in. They brought in more than fifty papers, some of them blank and others had writing on them, but I could not read anything because the agent was quickly turning the sheets after I signed and stamped them with my fingerprint, then he blindfolded and handcuffed me. I asked him several times: "where are we going?" his answer while he beat me was: "It's not your job to know, shut up and don't open your mouth."

They put me in a car and took me on a tour to all the branches from al-Khatib branch to Palestine Branch, etc. I passed through five branches and the last branch was the Syronics branch. Then they ordered the agent to take me back to the al-Khatib branch. I heard their voices. I felt after Syronics branch, which is near Qaboun, that they want to confuse me, because they took the roundabout towards the Air Intelligence branch in Harasta and not to the al-Khatib branch.

They put me in for an exchange deal, at Harasta Air intelligence branch, in an empty and desolate room. It seemed to me that the branch was empty because it had been shelled. I asked the agent: "Where am I?" He replied, "You want to get me killed? Shut up and go inside." I became sure of the place I was in when I found words written on the wall of the room "Harasta Air Intelligence Branch". The treatment was good, they cleaned the room, gave me clean blankets, and fed me the same kind of food they ate. There were no detainees at the time, and I stayed there for eight days. They did not tell me I was there for exchange, I was very anxious and I went on hunger strike because I wanted to understand why I was there in this desolate place.

On the third day in the branch, one of the officers came and asked me to eat my food and told me that I would be out in two days. I thought it was a joke.



But he said, "We have things with some people, we will take them and leave." I thought the exchange would be between me and my husband, they kept asking about him in the branch, he was well-known since he had struck the planes. I started reading the Quran every day I read the same prayer forty times. After seven days I needed to shower and clean myself after my menstrual cycle. The officer came in and said to me "Bring your things." I said, "To the bathroom?" He answered me, "Go, and shower in your house". I ran behind him, and they didn't blindfold me and I saw a car approaching us. My eyes were full of tears, and then I became afraid, I thought that the car was my husband's car and wondered to myself: "Is he my husband giving himself up for my release?" But it was not like this, I saw one of Qaboun's elders, named S.B, coming to take me under the exchange operation. I felt that a new life had been given to me. I did not believe the officer's story that I would be released. But when I saw S.B, I believed it, he used to work with security.

I ran towards him and said: "How could you leave me for four months and not rescue me?" He told me that at the beginning my husband had tried a lot. He went out with four of his friends and kidnapped a doctor with the rank of colonel from Tishreen Hospital in Damascus. When the regime did not accept the exchange, the doctor gave her family's number to my husband and asked him to contact them to negotiate with the regime. My husband contacted them and informed them about the regime's refusal to negotiate and told them: "If you want her, negotiate with the regime", and this is what happened. They paid one million Syrian Pounds to the regime, who agreed to the exchange, and when S.B took her for the exchange, my husband asked him: "How can I guarantee that you will give me my wife?" So Samih's son said he would be the guarantee and would remain a hostage with my husband until he receives me. This young man loved me because I helped him when he was injured. The exchange happened, and I left the prison at the beginning of April in 2016.

I returned to the besieged Qaboun, where the situation had escalated and the shelling was violent. We stayed there for about a year, and I returned to my work in the center until it was burned down. The regime was launching a war of annihilation, and only a few managed to survive. No one thought we would survive until we were displaced.

They brought the buses. My son, my husband and I left. No one remained in the area. Those who wanted to stay for reconciliation, we never heard anything about them. Some of them disappeared, others were arrested by the regime. It is impossible to reconcile with the regime. There is no way, they are not trustworthy.

We were deported to Idlib. We stayed there for ten days, then we left, the three of us "smuggled" to Turkey in late April 2017. We stayed in Antakya for two months and then headed for Istanbul.

My husband had sent his son to be smuggled to Sweden when he was eleven years old. The boy requested family reunification for his mother and brothers, and then my husband went to Sweden after his first wife. She asked him to choose between her and me, and it was hard for him to not see his children, so he left me. She applied for his papers and he left. In fact, before he left he asked me what he should do, whether he should stay with me or travel. He said to me "I am ready to do whatever you want". I told him that he would not be happy without his children and that his children deserved him more than I did. I and my son stayed behind in Turkey, struggling with this life.

Currently, I am looking for a job, there are few opportunities and for very long working hours and very low salaries, and my health doesn't help me work long hours. 10 days ago my son started working in a supermarket, and our situation is okay, thank God. I still have not been able to fix my teeth that were broken in torture, I treated only a few. I still see that the curses directed at us in detention, the standing for long hours until I was paralyzed, the fear and terror were a greater torture for me, watching people going in and out was another torture for me.

I cannot describe what I went through during my detention. It was very difficult, the detainees being tortured in front of me and within earshot. It is happening to my children. All that I went through is not comparable to my grief at the injustice that those young men went through.

Their death under torture was horrible. The pain was so hard for me, hearing about something is not the same as seeing it.

My relationship with my family changed greatly after I was detained. They are now afraid of me. Our communications have become limited and very careful, until now my brothers only send me written letters. They were living in Damascus on the outskirts of Qaboun. My mother used to warn me not to keep doing my work and asked me to stop, because she feared for me, they had seen what happened to us and she couldn't handle any more losses. After my brother's arrest, my family sent him out of Syria, and my other brother was martyred, and the rest of my brothers are in poor condition and my mother is always afraid for them. As for my younger sister, her husband was detained and died under torture, they delivered his belongings to her.

My brother told me that when I was arrested my mother was crying so hard they thought she would die, she suffered a lot. She said to them, "My son Mahmoud died, I am sure that no one will torture him anymore. My daughter, (she meant me) I do not know what they are doing to her, she's a girl, I don't know how they will torture her" After my release, my mother came through Barzeh to the besieged area, where I was, but my brothers didn't dare to visit me; our region was one of the hot spots, and those who entered were in danger from the regime.

After I was released, I felt my energy was increasing. I had started down a road and I would continue. My husband was afraid of me being raped in detention, when he received me, he ran

towards me and embraced me and asked: "Did anyone come near you?" I said: "No", he asked "Are you sure? Don't lie to me." I reassured him and thanked God, my husband's behavior towards me remained good. I was afraid that he would leave me after I was released, or blame me because I was not careful when I went out with my sister to bring the things, and had insisted on going. When I was released he reminded me that he had warned me not to go out and he said, "You were caught because you didn't listen to me".

But what upset me the most after I left detention, was that most of my relatives, including my friends, had blocked me on social media. I don't blame them, the regime is scary. Those who did not block me, a few, communicated with me very carefully. The regime while interrogating me took all the phone calls I had made and checked them, and directly shut down my number. I did not receive any psychological support, but recently I was registered in a center in Turkey. Yesterday I received my first psychosocial session and a physiotherapy session for my shoulder, because the bullet I was hit by was of the incendiary, explosive type; after entering the body, it explodes before going out. I suffer from calcification in my shoulder, some cuts in the tendons, and shortness of breath.

### **Final word**

Justice must be achieved. The criminals must be tried in an international court. I am willing to be part of the prosecution. I am ready for any testimony. I wanted to document my story so that the whole world could hear the injustices inflicted upon us. The regime is corrupt and unjust, they took my son Maher from his school desk, I have heard nothing about him for seven years. Thousands are like my son. Most of the girls I met in detention were between sixteen and eighteen years old. They are still in detention, and I communicate with their families. I believed in the revolution from the beginning, otherwise I wouldn't have let my son Muhammad participate in it; me, my son Mohammed, and my brother used to go out to protest together. [My brother] used to come over from his unit every Thursday to take part in the demonstration on Friday. We never missed any demonstration or activity. As for why my son decided to join the army? He saw at the beginning of the revolution and during a peaceful demonstration that one of his friends was injured in his thigh, in addition to the death of four martyrs. After this incident, Muhammad told me: "We should not remain silent." We witnessed civilians being shelled.

The revolution is in my blood and day by day it grows in me; it is true that the regime took my two sons, but I was always looking for ways to support it. I still have great hope that everything will be better than before if we continue to demand our rights, and rights must return to their owners one day.



## Between two Prisons<sup>11\*</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> - Reem, interview with the author via WhatsApp, on: February 24, 2019, duration: 2.20 hours.

\*Cover By: Ward Jubran



My name is Reem, I am twenty-five-years old. I was a baccalaureate student. I did not complete my university studies because of the siege on Ghouta and my father's fear about me from the checkpoints. I left Ghouta with a number of teachers and moved to my sister's house in Damascus. When her husband got released from the detention, she immediately travelled to Turkey, my only relatives left in Damascus were my uncle and one other relative. I was at that time working on completing my marriage papers to travel to Jordan, where my fiancē lived, he is my cousin, who hold the Jordanian Palestinian nationality, accompanied by my uncle, since his work requires traveling, I got my passport, although I was afraid to go to the immigration building because my father was wanted, Thank God nothing happened.

### **Detention:**

On March 16, 2015, I went with my uncle to the bus station to travel. We passed the first checkpoint safely, but when I went to stamp my passport they told me that I can't and that I have to check Palestine Branch 235 and then I can stamp my passport in al- Marjeh area.

stamp And I knew that I was wanted, While my uncle was busy in a car he wanted to bring from Jordan to Syria so much that he forgot me, I tried with the employee to stamp my passport, I felt that he wanted money, and made sure from my feelings when I found him and the captain talking to my uncle, but he was Busy with the car

I lost my temper because I couldn't travel. I was in a bad and unstable state of mind. I was waiting for my departure from Damascus which was filled with soldiers

My fiancē was very upset when I told him about it, he was coming with my aunt to meet me at the border

My uncle asked me if I want any of my things before he travels to Jordan. And in my bags there was the bride clothes and stuff I bought for my wedding, I refused and told him that I won't go back to Damascus. I waited for him to return from Jordan while crying badly, where the soldiers told me that I can wait for him in the mosque

I entered the mosque which was full of people who were not allowed to travel. The situation was very bad. I took a phone from a woman who was there. I called my fiancē and heard my uncle's voice who was next to him. I felt so sad because I didn't travel, and I waited for my uncle until he returned in his car. He promised me that he will solve my problem. And we had to wait till morning to go back to Al Suwayda because it was too late. I entered with my uncle to the immigration building to charge my mobile phone, so the employees there asked me: "Are you the girl they brought back from the border?" I said, "Yes," they asked me about my name and asked for my passport and I brought it to them, and they told me that my brother and my father are wanted and that I should visit Palestine branch, then they asked us to go to the colonel office, and there they searched my belongings, and took my phone, where its screen photo was for Bashar al-Assad, so of the agents asked me: "Who is this?" I said to him: "Our president." Then he asked me about my father's work and told him that he is not working, he used to be an officer, but he is retired now. This man was very mean, He put me and my uncle in an office near his office with a bed inside it, and asked us to knock on the wall when we want to enter the bathroom. I asked someone who was with my uncle to tell his family that the Air Intelligence detachment who took us, and at that time they used to arrest the women to exchange them during the negotiations.

We stayed in that room on the borders for nine days and we didn't know anything about our situation, although my uncle was not wanted, nor have to check any branch, but they held him with me and he tried to meet the colonel but he was busy.

During the first days of our detention, I was very afraid and couldn't eat, the food was canned, which they confiscated from passing cars. At the end of the ninth day, they registered our belongings in order to take them later. On the next day, on March 24, 2015, they transferred us with another person who was held in the police station, they tied his wrists with my uncle's wrist, and put us in the car, headed towards Al Suwayda road, and dropped the person who was with us in the Air intelligence branch in as-Suwayda. I asked the agent to let me use his phone to call my family, but he refused when we reached al-Mazzeah. My uncle knew that they are taking us to the Air intelligence branch.

### **Air Force Intelligence:**

We entered the branch where they registered our belongings. They put my uncle with other detainees under the stairs. Then they took my name and my family members names, and other information. My uncle told me that we won't see each other after that. I prayed for him to get out of prison. He had nothing to do with anything, he wanted only to deliver me to my fiancé. I do not want him and his family to be affected because of me and my family. I asked him to tell my fiancé not to wait for me because I won't go out before three years. He reassured me and told me you will be released, and if I came out before you, I won't leave you in prison. Then they tied my wrists and blindfolded me and put me in an individual cell that smells bad with a dirty blanket, one by two meters space, with a high roof I told myself to forget life, because I will not get out of this grave forever and cried, then the agent knocked on the door and opened the hole and asked me: Why am standing on the blanket, I told him: "the smell of dust and place is cleaner!" he laughed and took me to the inspection.

An air host came to inspect me, and she used to come from the airport every three days to inspect the women. I was less than twenty years old then, and she asked me why I was there. I told her my story and that my father is wanted, so she searched me and asked me to take my pants off, I answered: "I cannot I am in my menstrual cycle." She left me, and there were several new girls who were brought for inspection. Then they took me back to the cell. I told the jailer that the blanket was dirty so he brought me three instead. I put two of them under me and left the third to cover with and put my jacket under my head, and the jailer told me to knock the door when I want to go to the bathroom.

The first night for me was very difficult and dark and I was hungry. I waited for the dinner meal. It was a piece of boiled potato and a piece of bread and water inside a plastic jug. I asked the jailer water inside another bottle and spoke to him gently in order to respond to my request.

He brought me water inside cleaning material bottle which was washed, and this bottle was worse than the jug, and I didn't drink water except in the bathroom.

After days the lice started spreading in my hair and body, and the itchiness started I didn't know the lice shape, and I didn't remove my veil at all since I got detained at the border, but on that day I combed my hair with my fingers. I found a louse on my veil and got shocked. I was surprised when I noticed that the lice were two types, body lice, and hair lice when they said it's my turn in the bathroom, I got scared, and I said to them: "I have no clothes." They said, "We will bring your clothes from one of the detainees." In front of my cell, which was number nine, there was a small bathroom with a tap inside it, where cameras can't capture.



When they took me to the bathroom, I heard men's voices, so I looked through a small gap between the wall and the door. I found a naked man, and I didn't dare to look again. I was afraid of the agents, I begged the jailer who was from Homs not to let anyone to come near, when I enter the bathroom, he shouted talking to the young men of the forced labour, who are young prisoners, they distribute food and clean the prison, and said to them: "I will kill you if you come near the bathroom." I entered and washed quickly, and washed my clothes and then left them on the chairs in the breathing area, where the last time I had a bath was from ten days before.

On the next day when I wanted to bring my clothes, I saw the lice walking on it. They advised me to leave them under the sun. I asked the jailer to change the blankets because they were full of lice. I did not know how to remove the lice until I discovered how I can't pop them, and started having fun by popping it.

On the third day, they took me to the investigation after they blindfolded me and tied me. The officer asked me about my name and my family member's names, and their work, and I knew later that he was a lieutenant colonel. Then he began to give me lectures about his sacrifices for the country and that he was injured twice. He said to me, "Who does your father think he is? Does he think he will be a President of the Republic! Your father is dirty, and bastard" but I did not respond to him, he didn't insult me with big bad words. I spotted through the blindfold my mobile phone in his hands, but it was clean and empty except calls I made with my family, then he asked him about my studies, my fiancē and uncle, and told him that my uncle had nothing to do with anything and that he was not communicating with my family. He said: "Since you are beautiful, Reem, no one from the rebels was engaged to you?" I answered "yes, but I refused." He asked about the reason, so I answered him: "I did not want to bury myself there in the siege." Then he asked me if I had any contact with anyone from the Free Syrian Army. I said to him, "No, never." After the end of the Investigation, the officer said to the agents: "Don't lack her with anything," here got scared and wondered about the meaning of this sentence!

They took me back to the cell, and I didn't sleep that night from the sounds of the cell doors, opening and closing when the detainees went out to the bathroom. Where they were fifty-five cells, divided between two corridors, along with the singing sound of one of the agents. Therefore the torture sounds I used to hear from the investigation office near me, and I prayed that God helps them.

Then they asked me again for an investigation and got very scared. They entered me to the same room where I used to hear the torture sounds, after they stopped the detainees in the corridor and their faces were facing the wall, and they were blindfolded. The investigator was a lieutenant colonel, named Ziad, who searched my mobile phone and said: "Do not lie to us, we know everything" I told him, "I know that." Then he asked me if I was communicating with my family inside Al Ghouta. I answered that I didn't communicate with anyone except my mother and my young brother sometimes. He said, "In your bag, there is something they asked you to pay attention to," I said to him: "It is medicine for my mother and my cousin asked me to pay attention to it so it won't break," he said: "liar," I said "there is nothing in my bag except my clothes and my wedding stuff." He added "all your phone calls are in our hands, and I will not hear two thousand phone calls, but I will ask an officer to pick me forty calls, and I will hear them." He was lying because my phone sim card was new. , And there is no number for this calls, but he tried to accuse me with any charge.

I was scared of the torture sounds I heard and the sound of the agent that sings and walks back and forth, and I imagined that he will enter my cell and rape me. The sound of the fans alone was able to cause a psychological illness. I didn't sleep all night and I was reading the Qur'an. I knew later that the agent doesn't dare enter the cell because he will be punished and there were surveillance cameras.

The second day passed like all the following days. Breakfast came at six in the morning. It was a piece of bread, a few olives, a boiled egg or a few apricot jams. Every day they serves us with only one item, on lunch they put little rice, which looked like dough and tasteless, with other stuff I didn't eat, dinner boiled potatoes, the bread was distributed to us once a day, sometimes they served us tea, I used to drink a lot of water and try to get cold so that I don't get constipation due to the food. They didn't allow the young men to go out to the bathroom except on their specified time, Once I remember that one of the detainees, peed on himself, so the agent cursed him, and said to him: "Why didn't you knock the door?" But he was going to beat him anyway whether he knocked on the door or not.

They used to give young men less than five minutes for the bathroom, where the forced labour regulate their entrance and watching them from far one of the agents, and forced labour are young detainees their ages between fifteen and sixteen years, where the bathroom period for girls was a little comfortable, and enough for ablution. The jailer asked me once if I prayed. I answered him yes. I was able to pray since I was in an individual cell, but I didn't know the prayer times and I used to appreciate it.

I stayed in the individual cell for fifteen days, then they brought a woman to my cell they arrested her from the airport, where she worked as a cleaning lady. She told me that her colleague wrote a report against her because on her phone there were some revolution songs, that her son put them in it. She was a mother of three children and she lived in Jaramana. She was a poor woman.

During my stay in the individual cell, the officer investigated me twice. And who used to write my statements investigated me three more times. He told me that my file will be written on it "Terrorist Reem." At first, I thought he was joking, but I knew later that it was true. The investigator was nicer than the officer and allowed me to remove the blindfold, and during the investigations, they asked me about the names of my father's friends and I gave those wanted persons names and the name of a dead man. I know what was saying the names means because they will arrest them immediately. I don't want to hurt anybody.

Later the officer brought family registration, from whom I mentioned with the pictures I order to recognize them, including my father and brother picture.

Twenty-five days later, they took me with the other detainees to rooms above the ground. They put each one of us in a room. The girls welcomed me. They were happy in my arrival like any new detainee who joined the old detainees who are in the cell before her and started asking about the news outside the prison and about my story. They asked me: "terrorism?" I said "No, but half of my family are wanted for the regime." They said, "So terrorism," and laughed, started their questions about my story, and how I got to prison. At that time they were having a party, dancing and singing, I said to myself: "they are crazy, and I will become crazy like them," and I began to ask each one of them about her imprisonment duration, I was shocked by the numbers Which were between three months and a year and a half, and they were sixteen girls, usually despite the first welcome, but the new between them remain isolated and do not show their confidence immediately, and each one has a close friend, and even inside the prison there arrogant ones, like the room supervisor who was there from a year and five months, she was from Al Zabadani, she was investigated by the prison investigator, but Jamil Hassan because her case as they said a big issue, and we didn't know what that issue is and she didn't expose it, and she was arrogant because of the long time she spent in prison, and also because of her seniority and known to all agents, There are also good girls.

The room was clean and they were careful to keep it clean. They asked me to bath because the comers from the cells are full of lice, and there was a bathroom in the room, so I entered to bath. One of them searched my clothes and didn't find any lice, and they gave me clean clothes. On the second day they searched my hair and found nothing.

We used to sleep all together, they placed me close to the door, when I reached that room at night, I saw one of them holding a baby and feeding him I thought she was crazy and imagining. When I woke up in the morning I felt a little girl playing with my feet. I felt happy and sad together and cried. She was two months old and her name was young as well, the baby name was Sham. She was born in Adra prison and then transferred to the branch with her mother. After she became three and a half months old, they took her from her mother, who cried badly when they took her baby from her.

At dinner they used to distribute the next day breakfast, and the girls divided themselves into two groups to eat and put me in one of them, and they were given the task of dividing the food to one of them, and we used to cut the milk plastic cans to make spoons in the form of ruler, and some of them ate in the plastic spoon they put inside the milk box they used to bring it sometimes for the baby. Our day begins with eating breakfast and drinking tea, then we pray and read Qur'an, and then conversations start, there were no cameras in the room, we were able to take off our headscarf, where the agent used to knock the door before entering, and when we tell him that we are ready he enters. But in the individual cells I used to be in before, there were cameras, and veiled women couldn't take off their headscarves because of them. At three and a half in the afternoon, they were preparing lunch in a bowl, like "laundry basket," in which rice or broccoli And another one with sauce and a kind of vegetables, according to the season either skewers or spinach ... etc., but it was uneatable and taste very bad, but we forcibly eat vegetables to preserve the health of our stomach, and rice was a piece of concrete, we compliant several times about bad food, where it improved a little, But it remained bad.

I stayed in the group room for nine months. My relationship with the girls became good, and who used to fight with each other once, and play with each other after a girl came to our room later who memorized the Qur'an and used to help us memorize some of it.

The soldiers who were responsible for us were also responsible for a prison for the military youth who were abandoned from the army. It was an old prison in the branch. From there, the soldiers came to bring food and the forced labour distribute it on the cells. They leave it near the door and go back to their prison. If one of the girls got sick we used to knock hard on the door so that the sound reaches the old prison where the soldiers were located, which is about twenty meters away. When the doctor comes, he would stay outside the room and not enter it, and he had pain killer and arthritis medication only, no matter what type of illness he gave us only pain killer. The nurse passes by every morning and asks us if we need pain killer or cream which called: "healing cream." We used to wash our clothes when we bath and one of us pick them up to put them out on a tree that was between two rooms, accompanied by one of the agents, then return back to the room. Our breathing period was once a week for a quarter an hour, and sometimes they don't let us out. There was no light in our room this room was considered with another room for the pampered ones, who had no charges.

There was a hole in the size of a nail, we used to watch through it what was happening in the prison opposite us, and one time they took all the prisoners out of it until it was empty, so we asked if there was an amnesty ?! Then the vice head of the group came to us and collected our names. He said to us: "Bring your things with the blankets," so we thought we will be released, and the agents didn't touch the blankets because they were disgusted from us and them, knowing that we were cleaner than them. We then rode a bus and they transferred us to another prison. Which was a few meters away from the first one and was dedicated to soldiers. They also transported all the girls in the group and individual cells, and those who were in the individual cell were transferred to another individual cell, were usually they leave the one who didn't investigate her in the individual cell, so the others won't teach her what to say during the investigation with her and how to act.

The group of us who were in one room, they put us in a group cell with no bathroom and smells bad, and the number of group cells was three, each one with about twenty girls in it, and in the group cells there were "gallons" young men used when they have no role to go to. We started to collect them and put them in the breathing space until they were filled with gallons. We collected the dirty blankets and put them in one of the cells. The girls began to cry and complained about being transferred to this cell because it was cold and there was no bathroom inside. Where the chaos filled the prison, I was shocked when I saw Fadia from the top of a cell door. She was with us in the room. We thought she was released a long time ago, but they transferred her to Adra prison and then brought her back to the branch. They took her because her cousin was wanted. Later I knew that she was released after spending five years in prison.

After that, the forced labour became from the girls, because the men were transferred from this building. Transferring us to this building as if it's a sign for our long stay in it, during that period I cried a lot because none of us went out of prison. We didn't know at the time that our release will be through negotiations, until one of the agents told us about it, when we asked him about the meaning of the negotiations, he told us that we will be exchanged, and it was a great shock to us because we were from several areas, Daraa, Ghouta, Qalamun and Al Zabadani, So who's the party that will negotiate on us! So we got depressed since the last exchange was two years ago, "exchanging nuns." Where numbers of girls were released from the branch through it. And we were sure that we will only be released with exchange, settlement or amnesty, where the lieutenant colonel promised us that we will be released soon, but we knew that one of the exchange they prepared earlier failed and then we stayed in prison for a year.

I used to cry when the head of the class chose girls for forced labour. He thought I wanted to join them and invited me to work with two of my girlfriends. The girls fought and clashed to work in forced labour because its work with moving, it's better than staying in the room, they took the three of us took us and put us in in the same cell, and told us our duties. We distributed the food and cleaned the prison and washing the dishes in the morning and evening, and the door of our cell was closed only in the evening. And when the agent shouted to distribute the food, one of us should go out to distribute it. It was not an easy job, but we used to have fun about it, move around and get to know the new ones coming in. We tried to talk to them stealthily to get to know them even though it was forbidden, and we met the girls during the bathroom time. The choice of girls for forced labour was not stupid, they used to choose the girls with no charges for this job. I was imprisoned because of my father, my other friend because of her husband, the third was imprisoned because of her brother, and I kept working in forced labour for nine months until I got released.

In the branch there was a family from the Kurds of Damascus from the Ruken al-Din area, consisting from the mother, grandmother and two children, where they took them while there were heading to Lebanon, because the husband was a retired officer and was returned to the army where he defected, and the head of the Air Intelligence Branch had sent him with an armed battalion to Al Ghouta, so when he entered it with the battalion that was with him he defected, where this family had a special treatment, And they were pampered compared to the rest, and no one knows the secret of this treatment, for example they use to order types of vegetables they like, spices and eggs, and bring them under the approval and signature of the general and not by the head of the branch, It was forbidden to get close to them or talk with them even when they go out to the bathroom, the place was emptied, they asked us the forced labour, we increased the amount of food for them, we put pasta with the boiled potatoes, they used to go out to breathe every day and one of the agents told us their stories and that "they won't be released until the husband surrender himself or die" I met him when I was released from the prison. I went back to Al Ghouta and told him about his family's condition in prison.

Once he claimed that he died but the regime revealed him, even after passing nine years from their arrest they are still in prison till now.

### **The exchange:**

I went out of prison after one year and nine months on December 10, 2016, through an exchange between the regime and the brigade of Al Rahman in Al Ghouta. Twenty-three girls were released from this prison with me. On that day they asked us to collect our belongings. We knew that something will happen. , The day before, they asked us to take a bath, and before we leave, the head of the branch gave a lecture and talked about what the terrorists and are doing. Then we took our own belongings. The exchange included girls from Daraa, Darayya, Moadamyeh and Ghouta. We took the bus towards the General Directorate of Air Intelligence. Colonel and an officer were responsible for the exchange, then the general came and gave us a lecture where he knew the story of each one of us, he told us that without the exchange we will never be released and that they will never imprison anyone unfairly.

Then He told us to tell the Islamic brigade that he was the one who refused to exchange. There was an agent that entered every moment and whispered in the general's ear that this man was alive, so the general became happy and says: "Slaughter him a lamp, and distributed 25,000 SP," and it seems that the news was receiving that they are alive through the exchange, although no one came out from their side only women and children from the Alawite cult , and came out from our side twenty-three girls and young men, Among the things he said to us: "I am sixty-three years old and supposed to be a retired man, but Mr. President kept me for my experience, if the president leaves me to destroy half of Saudi Arabia." We used to hear those words and say to ourselves, let him talk what he wants the important thing is to go out from here, and we were afraid that the exchange won't work, and he asked us if we want something, so one of the girls said that she wants to return to her job, And I asked him: "Did you remove your request for me to review the Palestine Branch?" He answered that they would send a message to the branch, and then they took us to the Ash al-Warwar, and we exchanged conversations with women on the bus opposite to us. One of the girls asked them, "Are you going out by the exchange?" They answered yes, and we met them as we moved to another bus. They told us that they had been imprisoned for three years, and we told them that we have a prisoner with us imprisoned form two years.

Then the Free Syrian Army took us to a house in Qaboun where some women were waiting to leave in the second batch. The Free Syrian Army told us that they treated them in a good way. They put them in houses in the Zamalek area. They even let the married ones from them to meet with their husbands every now and then and taught the Quran. Then they took us in cars from Qaboun tunnel to Irbin, where the parents were waiting for us in a hall including my father, and brother. I ran towards my father when I saw him, and I stayed in my parents' house in Al Ghouta, even though I did not want to enter it because they were besieged, and getting out of it is very difficult. My brother prevented me from staying in Damascus because he was afraid that I will be arrested again since I was released through an exchange, then I went with my father and brother home.

My mother was injured due to the air shelling. She suffered greatly from my arrest and her injury. I stayed with her for a period of time until her health improved. I could then go out from Damascus and then to Jordan where my fiancē lives in order to get married.

Two months later, the problems started, the tunnels were closed and the war intensified on us. The regime separated Ghouta from Barzeh and Qaboun, and I got stuck in Ghouta for more than one year.

After the last war, when the regime entered and took control of Al Ghouta, my family went to the north because they were wanted and couldn't stay in an area controlled by the regime. I went out to Damascus with my grandfather and used the ID card of my cousin. I did not use

my ID card because my family prevented me from using it during my exit. The mark was still on my name and I have to check the branch of Palestine, but I refused to go and I told those who were mediating for me to remove it that if they give me land of gold I will not go to the branch, even if I had to cancel the entire marriage thing.

I wasn't comfortable in my stay in Damascus so I went to al-Bab city in Aleppo province. My father came to pick me up and we went to Afrin. I stayed there for one month. I travelled to Turkey in August 20, 2018.

My uncle was released from prison after three months from our arrest. Where they returned his car to him after they stole the objects inside it

#### Relationship with family and community

Some of the girls who were arrested because of one of their family members began insulting him because he was the reason for their arrest. Some of them also believed that their families can release them from the prison and that they didn't do so. On the other side, some of us don't accept the wanted one from our family to surrender himself. I was specifically ready to remain in prison in return for not to take my father, because he was a retired officer and considered him a defector and with the free Syrian army.

My relationship with my family and fianc  didn't change after the arrest, they were proud of me, and my relationship with my friends became stronger. I am from a well-known family. I was reassured that my family knew that my condition in prison and that I was in good health. Thank God, and that I was not raped and waiting to be released. I was always trying to reassure them through detainees that were arrested because of a report or a phone sim card. Not all of them contacted them but I was sure that one of the girls from Al Ghouta after she was released she informed them about my condition.

I learned from this experience hide my news, and not to trust all the people. Many of my acquaintances knew exactly my travel timing, and one of my neighbours, whom I doubt, said to me, "I hope you won't travel when I asked her why?" She answered, so I won't miss you where she spread her questions among people, how I live in Damascus while my father is wanted!

The effect of the arrest on me was great. I went out of the siege in Duma and entered the prison and returned to the siege again, which affected me psychologically a lot, and I entered several times in depression. My mother appreciates my condition but she can't do anything, and my family tried to take care of me as much as they can. I am engaged for nearly five years and I didn't marry my fianc e until now. I always wonder what the guilt I committed in my life is!

I once received a psychological support workshop when I was in Ghouta, and it was supervised by Turkey, and we didn't finish it because of the recent bombing on us.

I didn't participate in the revolution in any activity except going out with two demonstrations when I was in school. I think that the experience of arrest for women is different from the experience of men. The treatment of men during detention is worse and more humiliating and torture than women, even in food amount his portion is less. The women in the detention their voices are loud and they demand and argue. Men they don't dare on doing this, and this doesn't mean that women are not tortured, but they are usually tortured by the head of the branch, in addition, that the prison is equipped with cameras.

Once one of the agents tortured one of the detainees without the permission from the head of the branch, so the head of the branch contacted him. We knew that from some of the agents

during our forced labour, and we knew also that torturing the detainees won't happen without the permission of the head of the branch.

In prison, there was a detainee who exposed to severe torture. She was tied and hung on the door of her cell from the inside. Where her hands kept tied inside the cell and she will be united only when she goes out to the bathroom. She told us that she was from Chin town. We knew from some of the agents that she was in the army at the rank of lieutenant and that she defected and killed about fifteen soldiers.

After I was released from prison, many of those who came to visit me asked me if anyone touched me inside the detention. I told them and explained to them that the prisons and security branches are not the same, where there was no raping in the branch I was in, and I was cleaner from the other branches but the remaining time in it was longer. Often, the male and female detainees won't be released from it especially the men, they won't be released after one or two years, and each branch itself is a state. The society's view differs between the arrest of women and men because they are women.

I didn't suffer from any challenges and didn't face any annoying situation when I left the prison, but I was broken physiologically because I knew the situation of Ghouta. Even I was not happy when I moved from one prison to another prison. Although Ghouta situation was almost acceptable, two months after I entered it, it was besieged and the tunnels were closed. I saw my life as a journey from a siege to prison and from it to a siege. I isolated myself and honestly, I hated the women, even though they were strong and not silent about their rights. Because I stayed with them in prison for a year and nine months and used to hear their talks and fights, even though I wasn't part in any fight happened in prison, but I was tired of the women's sessions. Even after my arrest, I was sitting alone with my mobile phone. I couldn't study and my friends travelled. I was stuck and I couldn't leave my fiancē who didn't leave me as well, I was physiologically tired because I went out to a siege, usually, the detainee got happy when she's released because she will start over, as for me I was released to a larger prison than I was in.

### **Last word:**

Honestly, I won't say that those who tortured in prisons and who incriminate must be hanged, but they must be held accountable so that the ones they torture can rest even a little, because they honestly humiliated the people so much, especially the men and young men. But there were agents in the prisons who didn't beat, torture, or insult. I witnessed this, the ones who tortured were the officers, they should be punished, and of course one hundred percent I am going to be a part of the prosecution against the criminals and a witness on what they committee from torture and crimes.

I did not confirm my testimony with any party, but I wanted to document it now because it will be in a book and will remain for a long time and will not be forgotten, and for the coming generations to know what happened in the country, and my arrest will go for nothing, I was released from the detention, and other women were released because of me in the exchange, I was wronged and they were wronged too.

I regret now that I didn't work all my life and I hope to continue my studies which stopped, and my dream is to enter the university and work after graduation a work I love.



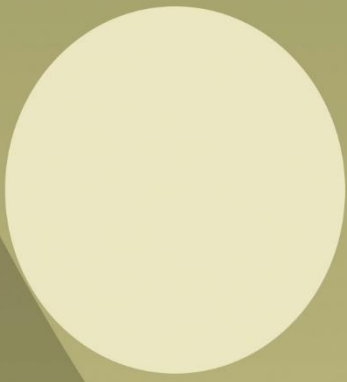


## When I was exiled from my Homeland<sup>12\*</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> - Yasmine al-Shami (alias), interview with the author via WhatsApp, on: March 03, 2019, duration: 1.25 hours.

\*Cover By: Walaa Al-Attar



I am Yasmin al-Shami from Damascus. I was born on January 12, 1980. I studied education and psychology. I have been in Turkey since March 14, 2014. My husband is detained for six years. I have three children. I work in the morning administrative in Syrian kindergarten, and an administrative in the evening in Syrian temporary education, which is only for the Syrians and will close at the end of the year as all Syrian schools in Turkey.

I loved my husband when I was young. When he offered to propose my family rejected him because I was young, and that I should complete my studies, and he was thirteen years older than me, but in the end, my family agreed. I got engaged when I was fifteen years old, and I got married after I got my secondary degree on February the second, 1998.

I continued my university studies after marriage, and my husband was accompanying me during my research sessions presentations, and I used to attend exams only.

I lived with my husband's family, and I was happy with him.

### House arrest

At the beginning of the revolution on March 11, 2011, my husband was arrested from Martyrs Square in Damascus, distributing leaflets. A week later, the first demonstration was held in Hamidiyah. My husband remained in detention for thirty-two days, and then he was released and went back to work.

On June 06, 2013, the security raided our house in Damascus, Kafar Sousah, at two o'clock at night, took my husband to an unknown place and put the boys and me under house arrest. Twenty-six days later, they took my children to an unknown destination. I was transferred to the air force at Mazzeh military airport. I stayed there for about five months. My parents didn't know who arrested me and where I was. I was released from the air force on October 01, 2013. And on December 10, 2013, I left Adra prison.

We tried to ask about my husband with no luck. We received news that he was martyred in Sednaya prison by the detainee who was with his family. They saw a paper written on it: "the date of the execution, to be hidden from his family, and their search for his body will reach to a dead end," but we are not sure from the news so far.

Through the house arrest, the security agents stayed with us in the house, they were two shifts.

The first shift stayed with us for three days, and the second stayed until they took me out of the house, which means twenty-three days. I didn't know why I was not arrested immediately after the raid, but the security agents informed me later that they did an ambush to arrest every one asking about him, even though the house we lived in was not our property, my husband boss gave it to my husband, and we lived in four months before his arrest. We didn't expect any visit because no one knew where he was.

At the beginning of the house arrest, the security agents asked me to gather my things so that I could go to my family's house because I was not accused of any charges. I don't know why they changed their minds and kept me under house arrest.

The twenty-six days were my detention worst periods, where no one can visit me, my children were locked up in the room day and night, but I was forced to leave the room to cook, wash, wipe and iron, I worked in this period serving the security agents. At first, they were respectful with us, until the second shift came, where they treated us with humiliation and disrespect.

On the tenth day from their stay, one of them called Abu Abbas, and he is a student at the Faculty of Economics, said to me: "I want to tell you something important about your husband." We entered the room, and he closed the door and tried to tempt me, and I was afraid that if I resist, he will rape me. So I asked him to turn his face, and I went to the window and told him,

"Either you go out, or I will throw myself from the twelfth floor. I don't know where my husband is, my fate and my children's fate is unknown, and I don't know what you will do to us. Will you kill us or slay us!"

After that day their bad treatment started with my children, where the beat and the insults started and with me, and everything you could imagine from bad treatment, for example, my son was one and a half years old, and they were beating him with a leather pillow, insulting my four years old daughter and I was afraid for my daughter, But thank God no one touched her, I kept trying confronting them, and whatever happened to me is better than my children getting harmed, and were not allowed to leave their room unless for eating.

I used to clean, wash, and cook for the security agents, and they were afraid to poison them with food. They ate only after my children ate, but I didn't have anything to hurt them with, although I wished, to get rid of them, because I didn't know our fate.

Through my house arrest, my family phoned me, and I talked with them, even my phone line and my husband's phone line were open in the first five days from their raid on our house. My mother told me that she spoke with my husband and told her that he will accompany me to visit my family, as soon as my son recovered, the same words they forced me to say to my mother. When she called me, a week later, my mother began to worry about us and started to call more. They prevented me from answering and closed my husband's mobile. My parents then reported our disappearance at the police station in Kafar Sousah, where they called the building keeper, so he told them that the security is in our house. The police and the security asked my mother to wait for us in meanwhile and pray for us because our situation is difficult.

Two days before me leaving my house, they took my ID card from me and then returned it to me the next day. They took my children from me, and I didn't know where to! And they took me to the air force intelligence.

### **Air Force Intelligence**

I entered the Air Intelligence branch with a number and stayed as a number during the inspection for a period lasting from three to four months until my name got listed in the files. Twenty days after my arrest, the major called me, named Read. He said to me, "Come in." My husband's belongings were in front of him on the desk, the computer, the mobile, his watch, and everything that belonged to him. Then he said to me: "Sit here, your husband was sitting here, and he confessed to us everything, its shame on us to call one like you since you are Damascene and it's known to us that you don't have anything to do with anything, but you are here for security reasons." I said to him: "Security reasons, and what my children business with all what happening is?" "But he asked me to go back to the cell and wait.

My concern was knowing where my children are, are they still alive or died? I was thinking about my baby because when the baby stops breastfeeding from his mother suffers a lot. How is he now? Since he was taken from me suddenly.

The girls in the detention told me: "Maybe they sent them to the orphanage, or arrested them in another room in the branch." There were small children and babies with their mothers in our room, but it didn't cross my mind that they were with my family.

In the beginning, there were three girls in the cell, and I was the fourth, and in Ramadan, we became twenty-nine girls. The room was in Square shape and located in the security branch garden. Twenty days later, through the inspection, Suhail al-Hassan came. He was the other one, not the one who named the tiger. "I told him," I am the wife of this man, and this is my number? So he asked me: "you are the husband of that man? Your husband will not see the

sun. "I asked him about my children, and he replied," They are fine, don't worry and you are here till we see what will happen."

I was called several times for investigation, and their questions were about my husband and what I knew about him, how many phones he owned, and how many IDs he had. In fact, my husband was old fashioned, and like the men of Bab al-Hara's series, seeing that the woman is for her house and her children only, he prevented me from leaving the house. I didn't have a TV or a mobile phone. When the investigator asked me about my Facebook account, I used to wonder, in the beginning, they thought I was mocking their words.

Every day I knocked on the door and asked about my children until they allowed me to call my mother. During one of the checks, Suhail al-Hassan told me that they asked for something from my husband, and if he did it, I would be released. Then twenty days later, I said to him: "If my husband is not convinced, let me meet him, and I will convince him." I even started arguing that I want to divorce my husband so that they will let me see him check on him and inform him about us.

They accused my husband with big charges, including belonging to Al Nusra front, relief, funding, explosions, murder, and if my husband did all those charges he would have not to pass by the checkpoints, we live in the center of Damascus in Kafar Sousah which is full of security branches, and impossible that he is this much dumb. .

After a while, I knew that they asked my husband to appear on al-Manar TV to speak for their interests and as they wanted. Then they told me that my husband had done what they asked him and that I will be released, and asked me to bring my things. I collected my belongings, which was my, and my children's passports, my ID card, and our official papers, I collected them all together to take them quickly in case of any emergency. But they kept all the papers that belong to my husband, even his picture, which surprised me and so I asked them: Why did not you give me his personal picture? They said: you must forget this man because he no longer exists.

I was surprised when they took me to the military court, and then I was transferred to the terrorist court. It was a holiday, so they transferred me to Ruken al-Din police station where I stayed for one night and then returned to the terror court, and then to Kafar Sousah police station which I stayed in for a week, and finally to Adra prison.

I stayed for about five months and know anything about my children. My health and psychological condition became worst. My whole concern was checking on my children. My oldest daughter was fourteen years old, the second was four years old, and my son was one and a half years old, who I was breastfeeding him at the time, then they allowed me to make a phone call with my family, and I knew that my children are with them.

### **Adra prison**

When I arrived in Adra prison, I sent a message to my sister through the bus driver that I was in Adra. My brother immediately visited me and warned me that my husband will appear on Al Manar TV. And if he has done those charges, I should pay attention to myself and my children because they won't survive from the people talk and their evil. After my entry immediately I was called and searched precisely by one of the women, and I was beaten by one of the agents when he discovered papers that I hidden inside my coat, where I sewed them inside the lining. Which contain the phone numbers of the detainees' families. There was also a letter from Faten Rajab which was a hairdresser in Kafar Sousah. She wrote in her handwriting, asking to tell her brother that she is okay, and asking him to bring her things, and when he discovered the

existence of the papers, I was afraid to be charged with bigger charges than the charges they framed me with. So I said to him: this is what's bothering you? And I ripped the papers "a million pieces," so he slapped me on the face twice, and start beating me with his hands and feet, and tried insistently to take the papers to read what's in it.

Judge number one, called Kholoud, was in charge of my case, she places the detainees always, and have no mercy. She said to me: "placement," and immediately my family transferred my case to Judge Number thirteen, named A.J. After eleven days the judge told me: this is weird file and you stuck in it" I laughed and said to him in shock: "me?" then I said to him: "They always asked me about my husband, they didn't ask any question about me, I didn't sign until I received my secretaries. The judge was surprised when I told him that the security stayed with me at my house for twenty-six days. Then I went in front of him and told him how they were treating my children and cursing and beating my four-year-old daughter. He said to me, "Go, my daughter raise your children and take care of them" and wrote my release paper.

My case was still in the terrorism court, but the judge released me, then he called me again after a while and told me: "Look, my daughter I released you for free, and I didn't take money from anyone, and anyone says that I took money to release you, is a lair. Call your mother from my office and tell her that you're released, and you still have to pay the lawyer fees that you hired" after closing my file he told me: that my charge was crime suppression.

I will not forget this judge and his words as long as I live, may God protect him always. I went back to Adra Prison and did a security check up. Then I went to my parents' house. Thankfully I married daughter I, and I lived for two months without any problems, but later the security started following me like my shadow. If I eat, they call me and say: "it's good that you are eating." If going out, they will call me and ask me, "Where have you been?" And if had a shower they know as well. Once I was checking the walls, I even started to doubt that my children and my mother are telling them!

Once they were carrying out raids around my family's home. I was so afraid that I wanted to throw myself out of the window and told my mother: "Leave me to die better than going to them."

I did not know which the security side was behind this prosecution, but I decided to leave Damascus because I was psychologically tired and traveled through the border normally, although my case was open in the terrorism court and still to this day, I came to Turkey, and after twelve days I will finish my fifth year in it.

### **The impasse**

My husband didn't appear on al-Manar TV, although all those who were arrested with him appeared, and none of them mentioned his name or story, as if he doesn't exist and wasn't arrested, and this was surprising, and confirms the news of his death, and also explains why the search on him reached to Impasse.

I don't know why they are hiding him! If they told us that they killed him, we would have made sure from his death, and if they told us that he's detained, we would have understood that he's still alive.

After my arrival in Turkey, I assigned him a lawyer, and we transferred her thirty-five thousand dollars. If she were more skilled in acting and con, she would have gotten more money from us, but what revealed her lies, saying that my husband told her that was not arrested by the intelligence air forces, and this is impossible. It was the air force who arrested him, and when I was arrested in it, the investigator told me that my husband sat in my place in front of him. I asked for voice and picture recordings from her to prove what she's saying and that she met him and still meeting him, She didn't bring the recording, but she informed us with the charges

against him which is: an instigator against Bashar al-Assad's regime, relief, funding, hitting checkpoints, and the biggest of these charges is that he is a prince In Al Nusra front in Damascus and its suburbs. I remember it, and I laugh, a prince who lives in Damascus and his wife without Niqab! I wear the Hijab and long coat, I don't really know where they invent these stories!

There was a person in branch 215, named Abu Haidara, who received ten thousand dollars from my family in law. To know any news about him, after the assassination of Rustum Ghazaleh, forty officers were arrested, including Abu Haidara, and we heard that they found my husband's name in his computer, and Abu Haidara was transferred directly to the as-Suwayda prison.

After all this fraud and con, we lost hope, until we got news through a friend that they executed him in Sednaya prison field execution, and made sure to keep this information from us.

Since then, I am trying with the lawyer to close my file, but with my file there were six cases, two released and four have been transferred to the penal, and it is difficult for their sentences to be issued quickly, but because of my open file and hiding all my husband traces, I can't return to Damascus, although I wish to return, because life is difficult in Turkey, so I always say: "I was exiled from my homeland and didn't leave in my own will."

### **My diary in detention**

My relationship with the detainees was very good, although it was difficult days, there was hope in life, after I got married I didn't get out of the house, I didn't have a friend, in detention I see the detainees and hear their stories and they listen to my story for the first time, and share our concerns, but in the room us there was a girl who works for the security causes problems between us, and inciting another detainee to be detained, "she used to cause problems, she was one of them," They brought her to the air defense branch because she puts a checkpoint to blackmail people.

Faten Rajab was with me, and when I was released, she was still there. We heard then that she had been transferred to Adra Prison. After that, she was unconscious and bleeding. Once I knocked on her door because I saw her bleeding from her ears and nose. She said: "Don't knock the door, come"

I told her, "Why do not they bring you a doctor?" She told me that they gave her injections in her head to forget the information, and that caused her bleeding, and they asked her to cooperate with them, but she refused. She also told us about her work and her friend who ambushed her, and about her sister Um Omar and her martyred brother, and when Faten saw me crying, she said to me: "You have hope to get out of here, whether you stayed for a month or a year or three years, but I have no hope at all." May her soul rest in peace in life and in death.

We had children with us inside the detention, and we were busy with them. One of them was a six months old boy and his eighteen years old mother, they were crying together, she had nothing to feed him, should she feed him bulgur, and she wasn't eating to feed him, we used to change for him and use the empty bread bag to tie, even Faten Rajab, may her soul rest in peace, said to security agents: "In my secretaries there are a million SP, bring him milk and diapers, they answered: You will not be more generous than the air defense!" So they started bringing her every a box of milk and a box of diapers every month.

The food in the morning was a bowl of milk, and boiled eggs, one of the detainees in our room divided it fairly between us, and for lunch our food was a bulgur, as if its cooked with burned

car oil, and dinner was lentil soup and boiled potatoes, if you throw it on the wall it will return as it is, I remember it and laugh. We couldn't eat food because of its bad cooking.

In our room, there was a bath and a sink, and the water in Ramadan came down from the tap very hot, so we put it in an aluminum "bowl" so that we could drink it. There was no camera in our room, but it was next to the door from the outside and in the garden, but everything was monitored.

Once, they had mistaken between my number and one of the detainee's number, so they took me down to the hanging room "hanging and torturing," where they hang me and hit me, and then they realized it's a mistake after I said to them: "now you remembered after torturing me, I am here from three months ago, what did I do!" They replied: "No, you came yesterday," and after they asked, they believed me, they took me back to my cell and took the poor woman to torture. She was a young girl, she was fourteen years old. I saw the detainees after the investigation with them. They were tortured, either hanged or tortured on the wheel or throwing tea on them, depending on the amount of alcohol that the investigator had drunk, or according to the investigator's mood. Once, the investigation took five hours. The investigator asking one of the detainees who were working as a hairdresser, how to cut hair, how to draw eyebrows, and how to put lipstick!

We used to see the jailer bloody shoe when he was serving us food, telling us he was torturing the terrorists. It was the hardest thing we had to hear the detainees torturing sounds, in the first period I spent in detention I didn't know how to close my ears so I won't hear their voices. I used to hear the sounds of electricity, and then I hear the young man screams until he loses consciousness. I can't believe how much they were tortured, God accepts everyone and releases them, "we used to hear them say he is dead, or smashed according to the jailer, some say," died these who still have mercy in their hearts before it doesn't exist."

Once, they were torturing two young men. The first by electricity, I even thought that the electricity they used can light up an entire village. He used to shout and say, "this is for God, this is for God." He continued torturing him until we couldn't hear his voice anymore. As for the second he said to them: "My God is Bashar al-Assad, my religion is Bashar al-Assad, my prophet is Bashar al-Assad," but they continued torturing him, and I said to myself what they are doing to him, not to know what he's saying, but whatever they said to them they kept torturing them, these sounds we heard from the building next to us, there were no young men in the building we were in.

During the period they said that America wants to hit the security branches and the military places in Syria in 2013, the door of our room was plastic, and we had broken it a little bit, we saw them when they took out a number of prisoners naked, chains in their feet and hands, and with shaved heads, and they asked them to put tires and barrels around their offices as shields to protect them. The room was shaking under us, and our ears close when we hear the rockets sounds that were on the roof of the building that we were in, which was shelling Darayya. As for the smells, we inhaled were burnt plastic, and we used to tell them that there was a smell of electricity like if something is burning. Sometimes we thought they were burning bodies.

When they used to tell us that amnesty while is issued during the holiday, they randomly arrest people and then release them with amnesty. None of the assets were released, who is released either through exchanges or transferred to the court. Those who had cases were never released



by amnesty.

### **Relationship with family and community**

The thing that won't be erased from my memory when I have released the detention that my son didn't know me. I was gone for about six months. He was then a year and a half old. I stayed a month later, trying to remind him of myself.

The first question people asked after they knew I was detained was: "Did they rape you? Did anyone harass you?" I think that the experience of detention between women and men is very different. My daughter, God, bless her. She was one of the superiors in school. The results of the ninth grade were issued while we were under house arrest, the security brought her the result of her examination, and for the twenty six days that we had security in our house, And from my fear of the people talk, I planned her marriage within one month after my release from the detention, why?! Because people are not merciful, she is a girl and the detention days will follow her, and people will continue saying that she stayed with security for twenty-six days, and no one knows what happened in the meantime!, but if I had a young man with me I wouldn't be afraid, quite the opposite, perhaps I would be proud and say "My son was with me home, my son did this, and that, and my son is a hero." But because she is a girl, I preferred to marry her and reassure her. She may not find a husband if people begin to gossip. She was fifteen years old, she was born in January 1999, now she has two children, but thank God my son in law is very good, I didn't regret her marriage, because I can't take care of her anymore, and don't have time to go out with her, caring for her, and I say thank God maybe if I didn't marry her she would have been lost with me in Turkey, and I say that God chose the best for her and got married and settled with her husband, and she has children and she's raising him in a good way, May God bless her.

After my release from the detention, my relationship with my family didn't change at all, but they blamed me why I didn't tell them that my life with my husband was difficult. I didn't really tell them because my marriage was my choice. They are in great sadness because they couldn't see me. I have not seen my mother and my brothers for five years. It was impossible for the Syrians to come to Turkey. My daughter, her husband, and her children were with me in Turkey, but they returned to Syria recently after her husband paying the military allowance.

After my arrest and the arrest of my husband, my family or my family in law were not subjected to any pressure, and no one came to them or asked them anything, despite all the charges they accused my husband of, and this made us wonder! Although my family in law left the country, and now some of them returned to Syria, and the other was still in Turkey, but the whole family was affected as a result of my disappearance, my husband and children, his brothers, when they knew about it, they left the country, even though their eldest daughter was examined her last subjects in high school. The whole family suffered. They didn't investigate them, and they were not arrested, but they were very afraid, so they left the houses and left Syria in twenty-four hours and fled to Lebanon and Turkey.

### **In Turkey**

I changed completely, but I miss the days of my time, I missed the imprisonment that my husband held me in. I was not conscious of the evil that exists in this life. I swear, the days of detention are more merciful than the days I am living now in Turkey, because people won't leave me alone For example, while ago, someone called me from a private number. He was talking to me, "I want to sleep with you, why you're not saying yes? You want money? Why you are so mean? Why do you care if I slept with you? One of your friends gave me your

number to harass you" I said to him, "If you were a man, you would tell me who you are, why do you speak to me from a private number?"

In Turkey, some Syrians look at women who live alone as a cheap person. If you have no one, you will definitely fall in mistakes. As for the Turks, we are rarely harassed by them, even with a word, but they are annoyed with us because they think we have taken some of their rights. As for the Syrian, "Why are you alone, and I can't give you a ride?" Unfortunately, some Syrians have ruined other Syrians lives. Now we can only rent a home if there is a Turkish sponsor. In addition to paying two months in advance for insurance, I always pray for God to handle all of this and be responsible. Life is very difficult, work is day and night, and what you get as a salary you will spend it.

I work for twelve hours every day. I leave at eight in the morning and come back at eight at night my daughter is in the fifth grade, and my son is in the first grade. I leave them alone for six hours, they go to school and eat alone!

Before I was arrested, I didn't leave the house, only for cooking, washing, and rinsing. Now, these are my last concerns. I want to develop, work, and learn, I want to know more people. I need to be stronger and make wider relationships, my situation requires intergrading in society, some of my friends have completed their education, but because of my young children with me, my movement is very limited. If I think of completing my education or learning a language, I need money and time, and they are not available now, and it's hard for me, but for other young women and young men they learned the language and studied, but I nevertheless consider myself successful, in Istanbul, it is difficult for men to manage their things and the family expenses, and now I am able to support myself and my children, and able to stand in bad people face, and thank God I'm still strong.

### **Relationship with the street**

My relationship with the street changed after the arrest. I was coward, I was afraid that people would be upset because of me. Now I say no. I am responsible for myself and my children. I no longer care about anyone satisfied or disturbed by my work, I no longer give up, I didn't imagine that I will live with my children alone, to leave Syria, so far I ask myself is it true that I am in Turkey, or is it a dream ?!

### **Last word**

After all that the criminals have done to the people, any punishment will be a little for them, the people who died and were martyred and arrested, and the people who shook their lives, it's not enough, no matter what we do, our right will not return. These days we spend abroad while suffering, whatever we do in them, it's not enough.

As for the survivors of the detention, whatever the procedures for their rehabilitation, there will be something broken. I went back to my son and who didn't know me. How will I forget? I spent five months, not knowing whether they were alive or dead. In the first week of the security entrance to my house, I always asked them: "How do you want to eliminate us, you will melt us, burn us, strangle us or slaughter us?" We had seen a massacre on TV and YouTube!

My son is still asking: "Where is my father?" And if he smelled all kinds of perfume and smelled his father's perfume, he would say, "This is my Father's fragrance." What will bring our dignity back?

My children grew up without their father. They grew up far away from their families, and in Turkey, also they miss their mother because I am out of for twelve hours a day, I work to support them and support myself.

I will be the first woman to sue the criminals, hoping, if judicial avenues are opened.

I wanted to document my story so that my voice will be heard, even if it was under a false name, although I am sure that anyone in the air forces when he reads this story will know my name. And I ask safety from God.

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## QUESTIONS

### 1- Introduce yourself?

(An open question for the surviving detainee to introduce herself in her words, and to learn about her, her activity and place in the family and society)

The following information is completed:

Real name or pseudonym

Age

Education level

Place of Birth: Governorate / Region

Previous and current accommodation - transfers - displacement

Profession previously and currently

Marital status - number of children

Detention date (s)

Duration of detention

Place of arrest

The party that made the arrest

Date of release from detention

Background of detention

Legal status: Were you assigned a lawyer, were you provided any legal assistance, was your case referred to court?

### 2- During detention

How many prisons and detention centers were you transferred to during your detention, and what are the differences between them and the impact on you?

Were your family members allowed to visit you during detention? (Number of visits, who visited you, incidents that affected you, etc.)?

How was your relationship with the rest of the detainees?

What abuses were committed against you and the violence you suffered from the moment you were detained until your release?

What violations did you see or hear about that happened to other detainees?

Description of place of arrest / detention, food, smell, sounds, writing on walls, etc.

What are the events, incidents and violations that cannot be erased from your memory?

Describe how you were interrogated, the number of interrogations, the most prominent questions, the method, the charges brought against you, etc.

What do you think is the reason for your arrest?

How did you spend your day during detention?

What concerns and thoughts did you have during your detention?

What has changed in your personality and life after detention?

### 3- Socially

Describe your relationship with your family before and after detention, what is your family's attitude towards your detention, and did they support you during detention and after your release?

Has your relationship with your family / friends / co-workers changed after detention?

Describe your relationship with the community before and after detention?

Has your relationship with the street changed after detention?

What are the most important questions asked after your release from detention by members of your nucleus family, family, co-workers, friends, neighbors, etc.)?

Have your family / colleagues come under any form of social and / or political pressure after your detention?

### 4. General questions

What challenges did you face after being released from detention at all socio-economic and political levels?

What changes occurred in your life after 2011?

What do you think is the difference between the experience of a detained woman and a detained man?

Did your arrest affect your interests?

Did you receive psychological support after you were released from detention?

What is your experience with civil society organizations in Syria and the diaspora?

In your opinion, what measures should be taken against those who committed these crimes?

In your opinion, how can the survivors receive justice and be rehabilitated after this harsh experience?

Have you considered holding those responsible for these crimes accountable if national or international judicial processes are opened?

Have you thought of being a party to the prosecution against these perpetrators if you had this opportunity?

Why did you want to document it?

Do you have anything to add?

### Note:

Any of the questions mentioned may be added or deleted depending on the psychological situation of the surviving detainee and her desire to document and narrate.

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