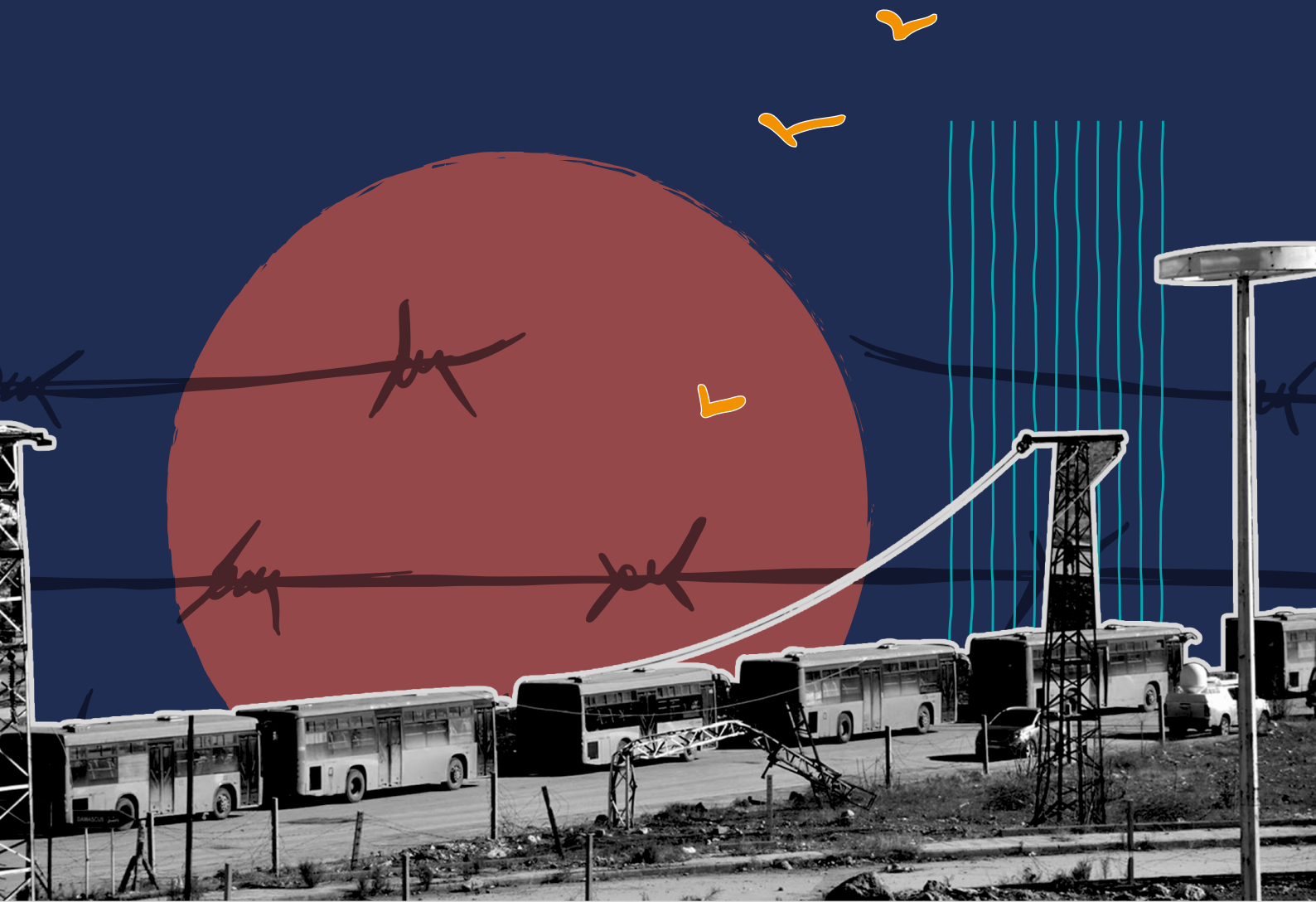




# Forced Displacement

## Oral memory of Palestinian-Syrians



A joint work between “ The Day After ”  
& “ Association of Palestinian Persons in North Syria ”

اليوم التالي  
لدعم الانتقال الديمقراطي في سوريا



THE DAY AFTER  
Supporting Democratic Transition In Syria

# Forced Displacement Oral memory of Palestinian-Syrians

A joint work between “The Day After”  
& “Association of Palestinian Persons in North Syria”



2022

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The Day After Association (TDA) is a Syrian organization that works to support democratic transition in Syria, and its scope of work is focused on the following areas: Rule of law, transitional justice, security sector reform, electoral system design and Constituent Assembly election, constitutional design, economic reform and social policies.

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## Introduction

Oral history is defined as a history of marginalized people or the history of those with undocumented history. Perhaps from here stems the history of the Palestinian cause compared to the Arab political climate. The Nakba in 1948, and the subsequent long period of time that threatened the landmarks of memory that occupies a central position in the Palestinian issue, contributed to this. For similar reasons, there has been an increased interest in oral documentation of the experiences of Syrians during the last decade, who witnessed profound political, social and demographic changes in their lives.

The objective of this paper is to provide a platform that combines the two experiences, and that is documenting oral testimonies of a number of Palestinian-Syrians who experienced forced displacement. It combines two overlapping vulnerabilities, and opens up a historical dimension represented in linking the narrators whose testimonies we have documented based on their own personal experience, and what they have previously heard from the tales of their grandparents about the first displacement.

Oral history does not aspire to replace written history, but rather to fill its gaps and support its narrative with vivid experiences. Hence, this paper does not seek to monitor the Palestinian interaction with what happened in the last decade of Syria's life. Several research papers, books, and reports have been written on this issue. However, this paper aims to focus on real-life cases that illustrate the human side of the consequences of the crime of forced displacement, complementing The Day After's (TDA) research entitled "The Map of Forced Displacement" that monitored displacement movements in various parts of Syria in the last decade.

In this research, we aim to humanize this experience and present it through the eyes of those who saw it, through ten testimonies about the recent Palestinian-Syrian uprooting. Contributors were taken into consideration to be as diverse as possible, although the case of Yarmouk camp, as the hub of the Palestinian diaspora and the political capital of Palestinian-Syrians, it was mentioned in most testimonies despite most contributors not living there anymore.

This work relied on video or recorded interviews conducted by researchers Rasha Barakat, Abeer Ali, Mayada Khader, Heba Eid, and Thaer Abu Sharkh, between December 2021 and February 2022. The interviews were then transcribed and edited in a way that preserves their personal character, the privacy of the experience, and each individual's language, as well as the convictions of the owners. The opinions expressed in the interviews are personal and are not representative of those who conducted the interviews, or the



Association of Palestinian Displaced Persons in North Syria, who suggested publishing this study, or TDA who supported this research.

The witnesses were selected from various Palestinian-Syrian camps or gatherings, in the hope of presenting the biggest picture possible of their many experiences of forced displacement, without, of course, aspiring to comprehensive, exemplary or representative coverage. The diversity of the witnesses allowed us to shed light on different aspects of this experience, as well as its general Syrian background.

The testimonials we provide here are mostly poignant. Only a few have happy endings. We hope that it will bring a just life for all Syrians, “and those who are among them” (the common Syrian expression that describes the Palestinian-Syrians).

Until the first half of the twentieth century, no borders separated Syria and Palestine, and the populations were interconnected economically and socially. Following the Nakba in May 1948, a large number of those who would become Palestinian refugees migrated to various areas of Syria. Soon, 13 camps in Damascus and its countryside, Aleppo, Daraa, Homs, Latakia and Hama were formed, as well as 14 Palestinian communities, in addition to Palestinians who integrated into Syrian cities. Following the Naksah of June 1967, a large number of Palestinians who had taken refuge in the Golan Heights were forced to flee again, accompanied by Syrians in the region, and headed to the capital, Damascus, and its suburbs, mainly.

In 2011, the number of Palestinians in Syria reached about 600,000, according to estimates by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). The Palestinian refugees who migrated in 1948 to Syria were given, according to Law 260 of 1956, rights to property, work, education and government jobs that are better than what they had in some neighboring countries, while preserving their national identity and their right of return.

We note, in the following testimonies, that sieges, starvation, bombing, and direct displacement were overwhelming due to their recurrence in Syria, including Palestinian-Syrian citizens, who were abandoned by the UNRWA despite remaining within UNRWA's geographical scope of work.

Finally, we point out that a number of testimonies include harsh judgements against neighboring or host regions and their communities, which sometimes amounted to hate speech that generalizes negative characteristics to nations or groups. Despite that, we preferred to preserve those accounts, and repeat, that they are not representative of the opinions of the contributors of this study, but were kept in order to avoid censorship on the texts

and their authors, rather than present curated, and thus deceptive, testimonies. More importantly, the testimonies shed light on a social symptom that accompanies a prolonged sense of injustice, including arrest, bombing, siege, and displacement, and living in a cycle of high competition for meager resources and ways to spend them in conditions of poor job opportunities in the north, and the overcrowding of displaced persons in need of housing, food, health, and education. We hope that these testimonies, raw and subjective, will interest those who can help facilitate social integration.

## The Beginning in Dara'a

**In the camp, we formed a battalion that we called 'Taher al-Sayasneh'. We didn't choose the name of a Palestinian martyr. Our goal was the Syrian revolution.**

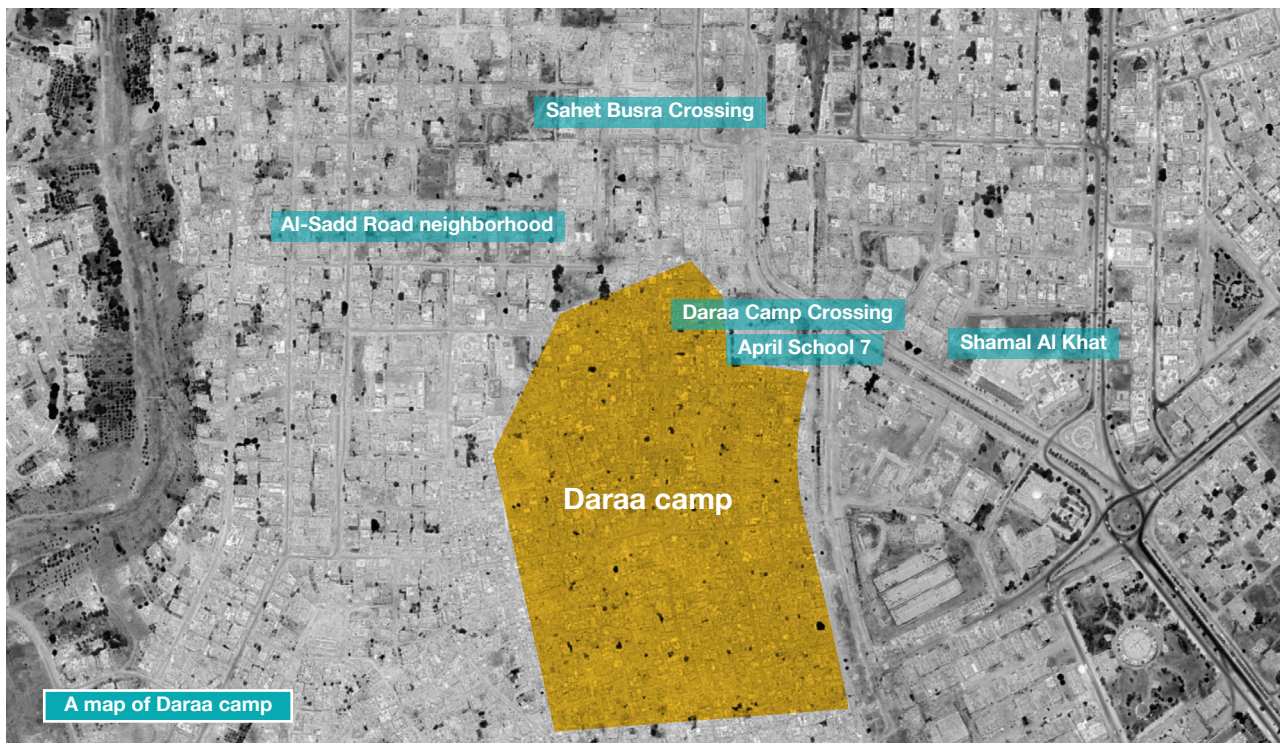
I'm Abu Obada. I was born in the Palestinian refugee camp of Dara'a in 1982. I studied elementary and middle school in UNRWA schools and completed my studies in Syrian government schools.

### Jordanian-Palestinian

The Assadist Baath regime split hairs with Palestinians. Those who came from Palestine to Syria directly in 1948 were called Palestinian refugees. They were granted some rights, such as employment and ownership to a certain degree, for example, a house or a car, but without having equal rights with Syrians. In 1970 my father was a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization and came to Syria following the events of September. Everyone who came during this period was considered a Jordanian-Palestinian, whoever came from Lebanon was considered a Lebanese-Palestinian, and so on. As a Palestinian-Jordanian, I was deprived of many rights, such as the right to employment. For example, we were afraid to enter police stations, where they called us displaced people and threatened to transfer us to the Immigration Department and to deport us unless we were sponsored by a Syrian citizen.

My father and mother were born in Palestine. My father told us daily about the country and how it was, about his family, about the lands, and about the difficulties of life at that time. He remembers the displacement in 1948, when he was eight years old, how his father had to take them one by one, how they were deprived of each other for about seven years, how they lived for a period in Gaza and the nature of life there and how the Egyptians treated them. The guerrilla action after 1967 in Jordan was aimed at Palestine, and my father was with the PLO at the time, and was relocated with them to Jordan. The men who first initiated the guerrilla action were those who lived through the Nakba, and most of them were born in Palestine. We were in Jordan at the time, which has the largest border with Palestine. My mother also told us about her country and family there who were farmers, she told us how they used to plant in fields and orchards.

## Daraa camp



After moving to Syria, Palestinians lived in Dara'a camp, which was established in 1948 for those who sought refuge in Dara'a. The camp's territory was owned by Syrians from well-known families in Dara'a; Suwaidan, Qetaifan, and others. Inhabitants of this camp were mostly from Haifa, Jaffa, Acre and Safed. Palestinian clans from Tiberias or around Safed sought refuge in the Golan Heights, which were still part of Syria before Hafez al-Assad handed it over to the Israelis in 1967. Most of the segment of Palestinians who sought refuge in Golan, returned and sought refuge in Dara'a camp. In the center of it there is Camp 48, in the north they call it the northern camp and in the south they call it the southern camp. According to UNRWA's definition, it is called the '67 Emergency Camp for Palestinians from the Golan. Right next to the camp is another camp for displaced Syrians from the Golan who came in 1967 as well, and established the largest camp there because their number was greater.

Right next to the camp is Al-Sadd Road neighborhood, which is very long. Next is Wadi al-Zaidi, which is one of the major tributaries of the Yarmouk River. We used to come down from the valley and reach Abbasiya, our cemetery grounds. The Jordanian border was a quarter of an hour's drive away. South of the camp, beyond the valley, Daraa al-Balad lies within very close distance, a kilometer or less between the areas.

In 2000, the number of residents registered with UNRWA in Dara'a camp reached 11,500 Palestinians. If we exclude the Muzireeb and Jalleen camps, with a large number not registered with UNRWA. The full number was 40,000 inside and outside the camp in 2011.

In the camp I lived in mud house. Whoever came before us lived in tents, but when we arrived the camp consisted of mud or cement houses. The camp was overseen by the UNRWA who supported education, health, utilities and services, sanitation, and built homes for many residents. Our camp is not large, with an area of about one square kilometer. When we were kids the area was muddy and full of puddles. Later it was more organized, the houses became concrete and rose a storey or two. The streets were paved and things improved, but it remained a camp with narrow alleys that can hardly accommodate one person for passage, much like the camps in Lebanon. Neighbors hear each other's conversations, smell their food, because of the proximity of the houses to each other. Each family tried to live next to each other, children, brothers and uncles. Later, the camp began turning down residents due overcrowding, and there was no room left for housing.

At the beginning of the revolution, the number of those outside the camp was almost the same as the number of those inside it, and they lived in adjacent areas and were near their families and their environment.

In the camp we did not feel anything strange until we saw life outside it, the people, their lives and their thinking was different from us. We didn't really go outside, all our needs were in the camp. There was a market at its entrance, and everyone who worked there was from the camp. We thought this was the whole world. I disagree with those who think highly of camps. It is true that it is dear to our hearts, but it is not our homeland. Our homeland is Palestine and our right to it should be our focus.

The camp houses are small, not even for children, so the boys used to spend their time playing in the always crowded street until nightfall and bedtime. In the morning everyone would go out, to school or work, or to run errands. The next phase in one's life was the transition to university and then the work phase. With regard to education, we did not have government schools. All schools were UNRWA schools, namely Taytaba, Kafr Kana, Safsaf, Tiberias, Kafr Lam and Ein Karem, and they worked in double shifts and were not mixed. The names of the schools were named after villages in occupied Palestine. It was rare for students to go to government schools outside the camp until after the preparatory stage. We went to government schools that were very close to the camp, as well as in the rest of the camps.

The customs and traditions in Palestine are not much different from their counterparts in Daraa. Food habits were slightly different. Al-Malehi for example, is a famous dish in Dara'a that I didn't like at first, but after trying it, I found it very tasty and it became one of my favorite dishes that remind me of Daraa. People dressed in similar fashion as well in the regions of northern Palestine, northern Jordan, and southern Syria. Women wear the shash, the band, and the thobe, and the men wear the kilabiyas or trousers. However, women preserved their traditional way of dress more than the men. In the camp, people wore the same type of clothes worn by people in Daraa. Although each region in Palestine has its own dress, in the case of Haifa, Hebron and Beersheba, people from all these towns dressed differently from the Bedouin tribes of Daraa or the Bedouin villages of northern Palestine, such as the Arabs of Al-Muwasah, Al-Shamalnah, Al-Sabih, Al-Haib, Al-Wahib and Al-Zanagarh. The customs, clothing, food, and even dialect of those aforementioned towns are similar to those in southern Syria, Daraa and Houran. All hailed from bedouin tribes. We used to hold part of the wedding festivities on the street in a large square, and engaged in Dabkeh, Al-Ta'lilah, and Henna, as did the people of Houran.

The camp residents have a strong connection with each other. Disagreements may occur, but when any occasion/event takes place, they will come together and experience it together. At funerals, everyone of all ages will take part in burial, which was nice. They also liked to participate in Palestinian events, such as the annual launch of the factions or the commemoration of a martyr or any Palestinian national occasion, and this was also great.

The role of the Palestinian factions in the camp was limited to services that they called awareness services, to educate younger Palestinians about Palestine. In fact, they were actually security branches, the General Command and the Intifada, the Abu Musa Group and the Sai'qa. When we were doing our social work, people would come to tell us that they were saying in the faction offices that we were establishing student organizations, and the same words were repeated about us in the Baath Party. This was two or three years before the revolution.



## The Arab Spring is Looming

About a month before the revolution or less, forty men were taken from the camp to a military facility, some of whom were eighty years old. The Military Security Department in Dara'a sent us requests to be present, so we went to the Information Security Branch in As-Suwayda for interrogation. We arrived there on time, and they made us sign papers under threat. We passed three interrogators at first, and then they took us to the officer's office. Of course, they did not take all of us at the same time, but they took all two or three together. They asked us about two things; First about the restructuring of the Fatah movement in the southern region, of course they mean Abu Ammar's Fatah, and this organization was banned. The officer, whose name was Nidal, as I remember, said that this organization was a traitor organization, and you know what this means if it is proven that you belong to it. As for the other question, the more significant one — at that time the Egyptian revolution had triumphed and Hosni Mubarak was overthrown. The investigator asked that if it happened in Syria like it happened in Egypt, what is our position?

I asked him: "What happened in Egypt?" He was afraid of even uttering the word revolution. He said: "It means that the Egyptian president has stepped down or something like that." I said: "You mean the Egyptian revolution? This will not happen to us." I began to give him reasons such as that in Egypt there are two classes that are extremely contradictory, one rich and the other downtrodden, and the downtrodden were the ones who carried out the revolution, while in Syria there are all classes, so what happened in Egypt will not happen in Syria. He liked my opinion and believed it.

It was clear that the Syrian regime undermined its people and their ability to rise up against it, and in their opinion, those who would rise up against them are the ones who were persecuted by them, aka the Palestinians, who spent a good amount of time in the security branches. The investigator asked me about a student organization in the camp. No one spoke about this issue except the General Command<sup>[1]</sup>, which provides security reports to the Syrian security branches. This report was old and dated back two or three years. The rest of the men were also interrogated because of reports about their affiliation with Fatah, which the Syrian regime considered hostile at the time.

Their reliance on reports and their content were the reason they brought us to the security branches. They were and still do not have more advanced methods. What they have in great supply, is torture and methods of torture. On that day, they did not beat us, but

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[1] The Popular Front - General Command :A Palestinian faction loyal to the Syrian regime .Ahmed Jibril led them until his death in.2021

were satisfied with insults and yelling. After the investigation, they brought us into a large office of an officer who was watching Al-Jazeera, which was broadcasting a program on documents from WikiLeaks condemning the Fatah movement. He said that these documents exposed us, even though they weren't able to prove anything of that sort during the investigation. I said that we are not affiliated with Fatah and we signed pledges to do so. Then he gave us a phone number and said if you need something or you have something you want to tell us you can call this number, now go. And so it happened with the rest of the group, including those who were threatened to lose their job or children.

During interrogation, they took us to a waiting room, where I met a young man from Nawa who told me that he was accused of participating in writing insults against the state on the wall of a bakery. So there was something happening in Daraa, but the regime was still able to control and cover up what was going on. Especially with its lack of conviction that Syrians were unable to stand up to it, they thought that only the Palestinians or the Kurds in the north could attempt this, as they were the 2 groups perceived to be persecuted by the regime.

## The Spark of Revolution

On Friday, 18 March 2011, I was aware of a demonstration against the arrest of children who had written on the walls of their school phrases such as "It's your turn, Doctor" and "Free Syria". They were writing with childish fonts and spelling errors, and were arrested by the Political Security.

The residents, mayors and notables of Dara'a went to see Atef Najeeb, who is in charge of political security and Bashar's cousin, and demanded that he release the children of the elementary school, with him only to respond to them with obscene words and threats such as "you leave here before I bring your wives and mothers...forget the children." There was an agreement to hold a demonstration on Friday in Dara'a al-Balad, and I went to watch the demonstration that came out of the Hamza and al-Abbas mosques. There I saw some of the people I knew from camp sons, but we were hidden and neither of us dared to reveal ourselves. I didn't participate in the demonstration, but only observed, and thought to myself "are they really going to protest?"

They stood in front of the Omari Mosque, one of whom was holding an A4 sheet of paper on which was written, "We want our children to be released." The demonstration started and was very lowkey and its chant was simple: "We want our children who are in prison, we want our children who are in prison." Syrians were not accustomed to demonstrations.



They were fearless, I know them well, and I know that the people of Dara'a al-Balad are not afraid, but they are not familiar with carrying out demonstrations, unlike us, who lived through an uprising and were demonstrating inside the camp, so we had more experience. Around the afternoon, people came to say that the governor would come to see the demonstrators, so people started insulting the governor. The ancient Al-Omari Mosque area contains huge black stones. One of the protestors climbed up and tried calming people down, saying that the governor was coming to see their requests. One of the protesters told the people: "Take him down. This is a Baathist dog. Do not listen to him. He is a liar." This word left a huge impact on me, although I am active in the camp socially and politically, but we did not have this courage, even in our homes we rarely dared to say this, how did this person dare to say it publicly and in the street! I thought to myself, is it possible that I will find the street itself in its place next week? There is no doubt that the regime will destroy it completely. The regime is brutal, that was our perception of it.

One of the men started chanting slogans insulting the Baath Party, Iran and Hezbollah, and people were chanting behind him. Although Dara'a was filled with the flags of Hezbollah and the resistance. It was a big and surprising protest — there was something bigger than I imagined.

I kept watching closely the situation and it was late afternoon. I was in Dara'a al-Balad — there is a large area that they call the descent or rise of the country, two streets, one of them going up and the other down, where the office of electricity, ambulances and firefighting vehicles were located. My friend and business partner were down there, we worked together on everything and we shared all the secrets, he was also interrogated with us. He told me that interrogators from the Military Security branch in As-Suwayda were present and armed. Also, officer Nidal from the Information Security Department was present with a Russian Kalashnikov. The issue is significant, it seemed, since they came from As-Suwayda.

Before the Maghrib prayer, two men were killed; Mahmoud Al-Jawabra and Hussam Ayyash. They were shot even though the demonstrators were not armed, they were only chanting, but the regime doesn't accept chanting, the its only response is killing. The next day, the people organized the funeral of the two martyrs and carried out the ceremony in Turbat al-Bahar. People from the camp were present, each one alone. We were even afraid of each other, but we wanted to participate. We felt a connection with what was happening, provided that the Syrians want this and that this is their conviction, and we're not imposing it on them. I grew up with Syrians, and even now, when someone asks me about my nationality, I say I am Palestinian, but Horan educated.

During the funeral, the regime sent its affiliated mukhtars to the homes of the martyrs to prevent them from holding funerals. They came to the house of al-Jawbara, and the father of the martyr told them: I want to know that my son died a martyr, otherwise what? Why did he die and at whose expense? You killed him. The security elements threatened him and urged him not to accept condolences for his son, and he replied that his son's friends are mourning him, and he couldn't stop them. The two martyrs were taken for burial on a Saturday — about 1-15 young men were killed in the funeral.

People were throwing stones in response to tear gas and live bullets. Of course, the regime used only live bullets. Rubber bullets on the other hand, were only common among Jews<sup>[2]</sup>. Things became very tense the next day, although they were still confined to Daraa al-Balad. We were going out to participate but the camp was quiet at the time.

Daraa al-Balad is the old district of the governorate; Athra'at was its name in history books. People in Dara'a al-Balad wanted to go to the center of Daraa, to the modern part of the city, Daraa al-Mahatta. The city is divided between Daraa al-Balad, which is the oldest and highest point, and Daraa al-Mahatta, which is the largest and newest, with large neighborhoods. Security branches were located in Daraa al-Mahatta, and that's where the shootings came from. Many people were throwing stones. We left from the side of the camp, and behind us were the army, the police, and anti-terrorism forces, who were at the forefront. They had to withdraw and flee amidst the stampede of protestors. Some protesters attacked and burned the court, and I witnessed what happened. It was Sunday, 20 March 2011. Some protesters tried to put out the fire, and I even quarreled with the perpetrators. I told them "Why are you burning the court? What does that have to do with anything? What is in it that you want to burn? Are you hiding crimes?" Most likely that was the reason. Some of those who were setting fire to the court attacked me, and two young men from the camp came to my rescue.

Then we went to the Syriatel building, which had been stormed by some young men, and they took the safe outside and tried to open it in front of many, considering this as part of the demonstration. Husam al-Tarani and another person with him called Abu Ahmad prevented them from opening it. Hussam called a person named Imad al-Dali, who was the camp's security officer in Military Security, and asked him to come collect the safe. Hussam was a paramedic in the camp, he didn't accept what happened and said that this was theft. He was very respected in the camp and his word had weight and value and everyone respected him. He was poor, yet he helped the wounded by transporting them in his car

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[2] In colloquial language, Palestinians may have often used the term "Jews" to denote Zionists or Israelis.

for free. He was arrested four times, and each time he was released after a lot of beatings and torture to continue to provide aid to the wounded, until he was killed by a bullet from the regime while he was in his car.

On that day, regime elements fled towards the governor's house followed by the military security. We were so happy that they escaped and we chased after them with stones, we thought we were expelling them from Daraa. We entered the garden of the governor's house, burned the cypress trees — it was after sunset. We were close to two hundred people, and many of the camp's residents were there. Shortly after we entered, the guns appeared and they started shooting at us. Unfortunately, what happened was not filmed. It is the same place where the statue of Hafez al-Assad fell in Daraa in front of the governor's house, only one street away following this incident. Dozens were injured that day, and about five people were killed. After the statue there is an amphitheater called Tishreen Square, and after it the train station that we ran to, I stumbled and fell and got up again and ran away. Whenever they fired, I would fall on the asphalt to avoid being hit by their bullets. I broke my wrist, and sprained my ankle. I hid at the station and found people I knew. There were people who were injured while we were inside the station. They were being taken by the regime's security forces. Only one person named Abdul Latif Kalab and two others I did not know remained with me. I remember they helped me hide behind the garbage receptacle, I was in so much pain. We stayed like this for a while before we got back to the city, the court was still burning, those who were in the vicinity of Syriatel were dispersed. I returned to the camp to find that an old woman named Umm Samer, from the Abu Amsha family, was hit by a bullet when the protestors attempted to take the safe in Syriatel. She was hit by a bullet on the balcony of her house. Dr. Adel Al-Hussan, may God rest his soul, treated her.

We entered the camp to monitor the atmosphere. I knew some of the protesters, and they knew me, but no one talked. I met with the young people I used to meet before the revolution, and they asked what we should do. I said that the decision has become clear, we must support the revolution and there is no going back on this decision. On the first day, I went to watch the protests, and I was not sure what would happen, but since the killing became so brutal and public, we should support the revolution, but we have to work quietly.

I came home and told my sister what had happened. She gave me medicine, but I couldn't sleep because of the pain. The next day I went to Damascus in the early morning. They had set up roadblocks. They would drop off passengers and arrest them based on the names of their families, especially if they hailed from Daraa al-Balad, such as al-Masalma, al-Mahamid, Aba Zeid, Qatifan, Suwaidan, al-Zubi and Hamad. They arrested everyone

who belonged to these families, regardless of their position in the recent events.

My friend is a doctor at Al-Basel Hospital in Yarmouk camp. I went to see him in the hospital. When he asked me why I was injured, I lied and said I had come to visit my aunt on Mother's Day but fell down the stairs. After he checked me he said, 'This isn't from falling down stairs, this kind of injury happens to athletes on the field and you're not an athlete. You were injured at the demonstration'. I tried to deny it, but he demanded that I tell them at the radiology department that I was shot in the field. However, they knew that I was at the demonstration despite my insistence that my injury was athletic. The doctor said my wrist needed surgery but he wouldn't do it because it would disable me. Regarding my feet, he performed a puncture of the fluid that was causing the swelling and prevented me from walking on it for twenty days. He said that he would not put a cast on it so it wouldn't draw the attention of the checkpoints. I hid my hands in my clothes because it was cold and we still wore winter clothes. I went back home and took twenty days off from work.

## The Palestinians in the Revolution

Wissam al-Ghoul was the first Palestinian martyr in the Syrian revolution<sup>[3]</sup>. Wissam was from Gaza, and he lived outside the camp. He was returning from work in his car to find that the Political Security had deployed snipers in the streets. He saw people with bullet wounds, so he drove them to an ambulance and was shot by a sniper in the process, and died. His family didn't hold a funeral for him fearing the regime's reaction, especially after security elements threatened them, and prevented them from holding a funeral. Most Syrian demonstrations would pass by his house and chant salutations and honor him as the first Palestinian martyr in the Syrian revolution.

A few days later, Assad's advisor, Buthaina Shaaban, appeared in the media and said: We know why the people of Daraa are demonstrating. We will give you an increase in salaries and financial grants to employees. For her, the issue was a financial issue, no more. She also said that the people behind this movement were members of "Fatah al-Islam" in Dara'a camp. The Fatah al-Islam faction was established in 2007 in the Nahr al-Bared camp in Lebanon. A person named Shaker al-Absi and his group created this religious movement that greatly harmed the Palestinian cause, and our reputation as Palestinians. This movement emerged as a result of the planning of the Lebanese intelligence, Hezbollah and the Syrian intelligence to destroy the Nahr al-Bared camp, and this is what happened. We have no Fatah al-Islam, but they used it as an excuse only.

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[3] On the 23rd of March, 2011

After Buthaina Shaaban's statement, some regime affiliates and aides were instructed to march in a demonstration, and to raise pictures of Bashar al-Assad. Abu Yahya al-Nada, an official of the Baath Party branch in Daraa, Ahmed Khalifa (Abu Khalil), a school director, teacher, and Baathist, and Abu Ahmed Nidal from the General Command, and Abu Samer al-Hamwi, who was a Fatah al-Intifada<sup>[4]</sup> affiliate, all participated in the demonstration.

At the same time, a demonstration broke out from outside the camp and chanted: "Buthaina Shaaban, the people of Daraa are not hungry." The demonstrators also said that people from Dara'a camp were not the initiators, it was the Syrians who revolted against the regime. Shaaban's speech was not successful.

## Entry into the Countryside

Later on, the villages in Daraa took part in the demonstrations. In Dara'a's villages, people are so fearless to the point of being clumsy. They were coming from all the villages on foot while being shot. I was against this approach. Courage needs wisdom. I saw people in the villages and walked with them, they came from many directions. They came from a distance of up to forty kilometers on foot, carrying olive branches. Many of them were killed on the roads by the regime, and whoever made it was killed in Daraa. The number of deaths reached 100-150 people per day. Pools of blood and shovels filled the roads due to the high death toll. This was only in the first month of the revolution, in the first two or three weeks of it.

Later, there were demonstrations organized in the morning and evening on a daily basis — in different regions. People from the countryside incited rebellion which resulted in bloodshed. There is no turning back now. During that period, I stayed home for twenty days because of my injury. During which the statue of Hafez al-Assad was demolished by a huge number of protestors who came to the governor's house. This was the most significant event during those twenty days. I recovered and began to join a demonstration here and another there, as well as the Friday demonstration, to which the people came to on foot from various villages. We were always masked. The people in Daraa continued to refuse to use the camp as an excuse for the protests. Sometimes we partnered with them in planning, but they refused that we be exposed. They told us don't get ahead of what's happening and stay behind.

Less than a month later, the regime sent groups to the families of the martyrs to grant them up to one or two million SYP, according to what I heard from each martyr's family. A large

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[4] A Palestinian faction loyal to the Syrian regime, split from the Fatah movement led by Yasser Arafat in 1983.

segment of people in Daraa are wealthy and own businesses. One martyr's father was paid two million SYP by the regime, but he brought three million SYP to top the two million and told them: "Now you have five million, but return my son to me. I don't want anything from you. I'll give you more than what you have, but give me back my son."

## Storming Dara'a al-Balad

On the evening of 24 April 2011, the regime deployed checkpoints that opened fire in Daraa al-Mahatta, and news spread of its intention to storm Daraa al-Balad the next day. How will they enter? What does intrusion mean? Many questions ran through our heads. That night I stayed up until 2 or 3 in the morning and then slept expecting the next day to be a normal day. But I woke up early in the morning to the sound of bullets so terrible that I thought it was under my house. I didn't find anything next to the house. I went out walking until I found some people who said that the regime had stormed Daraa, and that the first to be killed was a Palestinian young man named Taher who works as a guard for a computer store. He was a very good and polite young man. They entered the shop where he was working and killed him. They also set up barricades in the city and closed them. They cut off our electricity, phones, everything. This was happening for the first time. They surrounded the camp, the dam road, and Daraa al-Balad. Entry or exit was prohibited. They deployed snipers to kill anyone passing through the streets. A young man named Ayman was injured. Another person from the al-Masalma family, I think his name was Abu Hassan, was wounded, so we rushed him into the camp. There were no field hospitals in Daraa yet. One person owned a large house in the camp, so he donated the house to establish a field hospital. Dr. Adel Al-Hussan, an ENT specialist, was treating injured people until he ran out of medication. Then we used up all the medicine and needles to stop the bleeding. We were able to get an anti-bleeding medicine from the UNRWA clinic. It was closed, but we managed to enter it and got everything we needed to treat the wounded. The UNRWA group did not object when they discovered what happened either out of fear or courtesy.

Most of the people we tried saving were dying hours later. After about two or three hours, I discussed with Dr. Adel the issue of establishing a field hospital, and he said that he can secure staff to work despite the difficulty of the matter, as we needed specialized doctors, but the preparation and establishment of the hospital is part of our work as activists. He said that many of the injuries were in places that were not his specialty, and he was alone, and this is why a large number of them died.

There were battles taking place on more than one axis, the regime's tanks entered Daraa al-Balad, and we, the people from the camp, were stationed there very heavily, but when we returned to the camp we returned to complete secrecy. We tried to secure what was needed for those who were trapped. Those who were stationed outside the camp had no water, food, or medicine. On one occasion, we collected medicine from the camp's residents and distributed them to those stationed outside it. Hussam Al-Tarani was the one delivering the materials in his car, and I was accompanying him despite the danger of the process. The second person who helped was Musa al-Tafouri aka Abu Ahmad. He was well known for his kindness and was well liked, his participation was conducive to deliver what was needed. He was killed at the end of this battle, as he was among the defenders of the house of Sheikh Ahmed Al-Sayasneh during the regime's attempts to storm it.

The battle lasted two weeks. We ran up and down for about ten days, and then snipers took control of the road. Whoever was in Daraa al-Balad continued to participate like Abu Ahmad, but those who used to go and come back daily, like us, could no longer move. The regime still has detainees since then, so I will not mention their names. Many were also killed, Musa al-Tufouri and Mustafa al-Bahiti were killed in the camp. Aws Fellaha became mentally ill and received treatment. He participated with the younger people and insisted on staying. He survived that battle after someone from Daraa hid him, and then he was killed after that battle. One of the people currently in the regime's areas was seriously injured and is still suffering from the injury to this day.

After the two weeks were over, they tried to prevent us from burying the dead, but in Daraa we are characterized by stubbornness, Palestinians or Syrians. This stubbornness was one of the features that served the revolution. We do not take orders from anyone. People who went to bury the dead were shot at, and some were killed.

## **The Beginning of Weaponization**

At the end of that stage, we didn't want a confrontation with the regime because we didn't have enough weapons. Our area was a smuggling zone because it was a border. Smugglers supplied us with weapons. They did not participate with us, but only gave us their weapons. However, we did not have enough weapons to begin a battle. We were in a desperate stage and in too short a condition to be in a defensive position, with the regime tanks versus the few guns we had.

We understood that there is no point in confrontation and that it is necessary to hit and run. The people in Dara'a lacked military experience, and for this they sought the help of the



Palestinians, who had experience in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. But those of us who were participating were still very careful in their training, to the point that I did not know of some of those who trained until after they finished training and left the area. Months later, we were attacking battalions, barracks, and brigades of the regime's army here and there and disarming them. We brought a gun to the camp and hid it. We always covered our faces, with the exception of two people who were clearly visible in the camp: Yahya al-Salti, may he rest in peace, Rabee Habib Abu Ahed. Behind them was a large army with their faces covered, and I was one of them. We continued that way for about a year.

On Fridays, the regime brought in large numbers of army personnel. On one occasion, Russian ZIL cars came full of weapons, they were placed in front of the demonstrators and they ordered the officers to abandon the vehicles. People attacked the cars and took all their weapons. The regime did this to say that the demonstrations in Dara'a are armed and not peaceful.

The movement had to be armed from the start, and not peaceful. This regime is a criminal regime that kills anyone who stands in its way, even if by mere chanting. It killed 100-150 people daily. I supported the notion that the lines connecting Daraa and Damascus be cut, i.e. between the security branches, not the army. The security branches are the ones that were in control of the situation, not the army. Security headquarters had to be stormed, Military Security led by Louay al-Ali and his group, Political Security led by Atef Najeeb, Bashar al-Assad's cousin, State, Air and Criminal Security as well. They were the ones linking Dara'a and the regime in Damascus, and they were the ones who were asking for reinforcements, Hezbollah and Iran, and they were the ones who were strategically planning all the tactics, while officers in the army were constantly defecting. Our houses were filled with army defectors.

On 25 April 2011, we found dead soldiers with missions to the Golan. One of them was from Idlib. They had made them understand that they were going to fight in the Golan, but found themselves here instead. Currently, the army has become mostly shabiha, but at that time the army members were good young men who saw us and turned a blind eye, many of whom offered assistance. While the security elements, especially the military and the air force, and their supporters in the streets, were the main drivers of the killing and thuggery in Daraa. They had a large network of informants. They were few at first, but their number increased as a result of granting privileges to the informant, such as giving him a gas jar or a bundle of bread or allowing him to go see his family. That is why, in my opinion, weaponizing the revolution was necessary from the beginning to avoid this confrontation.



Many friends from Yarmouk camp came to participate in the demonstrations, especially on Friday. They would come the day before and stay with us. In 2012, a group of young people tried to coordinate between the camps. Ahmed Koussa was the leader. He gathered representatives from the camps, and with him was the engineer, Munir al-Khatib, who used the name Faris as a nom de guerre. Ahmed Koussa traveled to Lebanon under the pretext of tourism as a security cover, and there he followed a course in human rights, I believe, with Human Rights Watch. After his return, he told me that no one knew about the burned bodies, and the regime had burned four bodies in Dara'a camp. When Koussa told them, he discovered that no one knew that there was a camp in Dara'a in the first place. We agreed to establish a human rights website representing the Palestinian camps to document that stage. I told him that I had created a page called the Palestinian Documentation Center (Wathiq<sup>[5]</sup>), in which I only document what is happening in my area. We have agreed that I will continue working on this page until the new website is ready. This page still exists, although work on it has stopped due to the death of all its staff.

Weaponization began in earnest around Septemeber of 2011. In the camp, we formed a battalion, which we called the Taher al-Sayasneh Brigade. He was a defector. We did not choose the name of a Palestinian martyr, our objective was to support the Syrian revolution only.

### **The first incursion into the camp**

We entered our first private battle when Daraa camp was stormed on 27 July 2012, in which eleven of our group were killed. It was the beginning of the month of Ramadan and it was a Friday, at dawn and after suhoor, I wandered around the area, only the young fighters were awake in disguise. Then I went to sleep, I was awakened by a phone call from my sister at 9am telling me to get out of the house because there was a tank next to my house. I climbed to the neighbors' houses to escape. I reached the street and found two young men, Muhammad al-Masri and Abd al-Rahman al-Shamlouni, who wanted to set up a deck to face the tanks.

I entered the camp to find Yahya al-Salti, who was killed with the group that day. He asked me what was happening, and I said that I heard that a regime battalion, which included more than sixty elements with their weapons, would storm the place, and that they brought tanks to the side of the outpost. We thought they were going to storm the camp so we mobilized.

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[5] <https://www.facebook.com/Wathek.Daraa>

Colonel Qahtan Tabasha had defected a short time ago from the Palestine Liberation Army<sup>[6]</sup>, the 421st Battalion, and had never publicly participated in any battle, and this was the first time he revealed himself. Like him was Ammar Abu Sariya (Abu Qusay), may he rest in peace. Even I went out publicly that day and maskless. We were large in number, but we only had twenty guns and a few ammunition. We handed the leadership over to Colonel Qahtan, who divided us into a group that stayed in the same place and another that went to attack the regime's positions in the market to pull the tanks out. I was with those who stayed inside the camp, we were fasting and exhausted, so we entered to rest a little. After a while, we received a call telling us about the young men who had been killed. Suleiman came and took a bag of bullets and ran, and after about a quarter of an hour he was brought back a dead corpse. Yahya died, and Nawras al-Tahini's body was ripped apart by the sniper. Abu Ali al-Shamlouni and another young man were injured. It was the time of the noon prayer when we learned of a battle at the outpost next to the camp. Ra-bee said that no one should go because the fighting there became random and some of us were killed by bullets from those with us. Mohamed Al-Masry insisted on participating. I tried a lot to stop him, but he got out. He was a young eighteen-year-old with an M4 sniper gun and there were only two pieces of it in Daraa and he was proud of it. He was never satisfied to stop, even if the fronts were calm. He was going out alone. Once he and another young man named Abd al-Rahman al-Shamlouni went out and sniped about sixteen or seventeen members of the regime and brought their weapons. Mohamed died on this day trying to storm the police station, and many died; Abdul Latif Kallab and Nabulsi. Most of them died of hemorrhage due to the lack of treatment. It was a sudden fight without preparation. We stayed for four days. We took prisoners from the regime, and they were distributed between the camp and the dam road. I heard that those who were on the way to the dam took a ransom from their families and released them. We did not do that. We hid the prisoners and fed them despite our lack of food.

On the fourth day, the Free Syrian Army in the area withdrew, and not only in the camp. Everyone around us withdrew and we were the only ones left. Husam al-Tarani and Sheikh Abu Khaled, who was an old fighter with us, came from Haifa, so they took us in their cars. We went out to Yaduda and left the prisoners in the camp. I heard that when the regime entered the camp and found them, they took them to prison. We were burying the dead in a small garden next to the camp. We dug pits there and buried the bodies. In the first hole we buried twelve people. The second hole was in the shape of an L. Ali Al-Arabi was buried in it, a person from the Sayasna family, also a woman, Khadra Khalaf was shot dead by a sniper while she was walking. A philosophy professor was found dead and buried.

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[6] Formed in 1964 as a military wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization ,but it fell within the circle of the Syrian regime.

The garden turned into a cemetery in these four days.

On the evening of the fourth day, the planes flew over and bombarded us. We went to Yaduda, we ate our “suhour” there and left in the morning for Muzayrib and arrived around eleven in the morning — that’s when the planes hit the place where we were in Yaduda. We became exposed, so we hid outside the camp for a while. There was a battle in Muzayrib, and then in Zayzoun, and we engaged in the battle, and so did the people in the camp. Qahtan Tabasha was with us and was killed on the first day of October 2012. As a result of this, the camp was stormed in search of his body, around the 4th of October, but we had buried him outside the camp. They were afraid that his corpse would be turned into a symbol so they stormed the place looking for it. They found four bodies of young men killed by the regime, but no one was able to bury them, so the young men hid them under Zenko boards, and when the regime found them, they burned the bodies. One of the bodies was Abdel-Laboudi, another one was a young man’s from the Al-Atqi family, the third was Ibrahim Al-Masry, and I think the fourth was Muhammad Freij. Muhammad is the brother of Ahmed and Ghaylan. Ghaylan was killed in the incident of storming the police station, and Ahmad was shot by a sniper the next day in the camp. About two months later, Muhammad died in this battle. I asked him to flee, but he said that he could no longer leave because the battles were happening in very close proximity to him. In this battle also Husam Al-Tarani died. They were heroes and had a revolutionary ideology, regardless of our differences on the issue of pacifism and armament. My opinion from the beginning was that this regime does not respond to demonstrations. As Palestinians, we were not decision-makers but the revolutionary people of Daraa were, and the decision was theirs. At this time the four corpses incident occurred. Of course, the regime’s statements about this were false. They said that they had burned the bodies of Pakistanis present in the area. This is what was promoted by their media about the presence of foreigners from outside the country. We didn’t have the ability to keep up with the regime’s media. We created a page called “Daraa News Camp”, but it was closed, as were all the social media pages related to the revolution. After that, a comprehensive page was created for all of Daraa called “Naba” and we engaged in it. However, the documentation of events was never at the level it should have been.

### **Another Camp Incursion**

In November, the regime stormed the camp again, and it was Eid al-Adha. A car exploded in front of the regime’s train station, and none of its members were killed, only the shops in the vicinity were impacted. We immediately accused the regime of having carried out

the bombing, as heavy sniping and shooting followed, and Dara'a was closed off for all the days of Eid.

A young man named Muammar Khalil al-Kharroubi from the camp died, his nom de guerre was Muammar al-Kawy (Abu Fadi). He was shot by a sniper while he was helping the injured. Muhammad Khalaf (Abu Jaafar) was also martyred while trying to get an ambulance. He took part in the battle of the camp. During this period, a group of young people and myself were in the western countryside. We worked wherever there were job opportunities. We stayed on farms, for example, away from civilians so as not to harm them. After this, on November 4, Daraa camp was stormed. The raids became a monthly occurrence. My family was outside the camp and I was in Muzayrib. Ammar Abu Sariya was the leader of the group that responded to the intrusion. About ten of his fighters were killed, including a young man from the al-Qassas family.

In the evening of the same day, my sister was on Mughrabi Street in Yarmouk camp with my aunt in front of the house, and a missile fell on them from the direction of Nisreen neighborhood, and both of them died. The exodus of people from Yarmouk camp had not yet begun. Activity there was still relatively quiet at the time, supporting the neighboring areas such as Al-Hajar Al-Aswad, Babila, Sahem and Al-Ghouta. Many of our friends from Yarmouk camp were killed while trying to repel incursions into Ghouta, Al-Hajar, and others. This happened before the storming of Yarmouk camp.

I was still in Muzayrib, keeping track of our camp. People were leaving it and some of them died on the road during their journey outside the camp, like Umm Hassan al-Safuri, she was an old woman and died of high sugar.

Many young men were killed in November. Regime elements entered the camp and killed people in their homes; A very peaceful old men's barber who went by the name of Franco, was killed by regime elements in his home. His brother was also killed. They killed Aws, who was taking medicine for a psychological problem — they found him on the road and killed him; they killed a mentally disturbed person who is the son of Umm Saleh al-Tarani. The army stole everything they could get their hands on, looting washing machines, refrigerators, computers, gold, etc. and placed them on top of the tanks. One time I went out, I thought what I would take with me, so I took the laptop and put it in my family's house. On our return, they had broken into the house and looted everything in it, the laptop, the gold and everything, even the little girl's piggy bank.

## In Yarmouk camp

I was on a visit to Yarmouk camp to coordinate with Ahmed Koussa to organize a collective platform that spoke in the name of the camps when the planes carried out a raid on the 16th of December 2012 — 2 missiles. My wife was with me, I took her home and went to look, the first missile landed in the courtyard of the Galilee School. The buildings surrounding the school were very damaged, the walls of the buildings collapsed, the houses were exposed and everything inside them was destroyed. I found people dead in Abdul Qadir Mosque, next to the mosque is Al-Basel Hospital, where my doctor friend works. He said he was having an operation, during which the glass wall broke and they didn't know what had happened. They completed the operation in a second room until it was over, and they went out and started receiving those who were injured. The beating was terrible that day. I didn't know the numbers of the dead, but the ones I saw were about forty. Everyone volunteered to help with transportation, ambulance and burial. In the school, the missile landed in its yard, relieving the pressure. As for the crowded area of the Abdul Qader Mosque, the situation was worse. Those who did not die from the missile or its shrapnel died from the pressure of the explosion. A similar strike in Daraa turned a large building into dust. In the evening people began to leave the camp, we went out to the street to see large numbers of all ages, some of them carrying bags, and other belongings. They were walking without cars. It looked like doomsday. Yarmouk camp had a large population, inhabited by Palestinians and Syrians, and was a refuge for many. We, the existing residents, tried to preserve the camp and confront the regime's attack, but there were stupid violations by a person named Bayan Mazal and his group in Hajar al-Aswad, who was said to have been found out that he was an agent of the regime. Unlike Ahmed Koussa and Mounir who were loyal to the cause.

For amusement, and because I am from Daraa camp, earlier in the revolution, I met with some of the camp's young men, and they asked me to give them "guidance" for the next stage of the revolt. I laughed and answered them that the markets will be closed at this stage and that they should supply the largest amount of cigarettes and coffee, but militarily, I wouldn't help them with anything. Previously, in Daraa camp, when I no longer had coffee and cigarettes, I went to the homes of people I knew, I called them and told them that I would go in to get coffee.

## The Free Palestinian Liberation Army

I left Yarmouk camp and returned to Daraa. We were planning to defect from the Palestine Liberation Army and to declare a Free Palestinian Liberation Army, similar to the Free Syrian Army. We gathered in Daraa in coordination with Ahmed Koussa and his group, as well as with a colonel named Abu Uday al-Hassan, may God rest his soul, who sent a lieutenant to Daraa, and I met with him and drew a map to secure the colonel's entry to the camp.

At that time the colonel had not defected, he returned to his position and defected many months later. About 250 soldiers were supposed to defect with him with some weapons, but they let him down. About 25 or 50 people defected with him and he did not acquire the quantity of weapons that he had planned. We were five or six groups, Palestinian and Syrian, in Daraa in a new formation. I was organizing a group that wanted to defect in As-Suwayda, with more than fifteen young men, whom I coordinated with over many months and appointed a person in charge of them, and among them was the official of the warehouse that we were going to take over.

On 7 January 2013 we went to As-Suwayda from Muzayrib. After our departure, I received a call informing me of the death of Ahmed Koussa, he was shot. I was in shock, Ahmed was like a brother to me. I was very close to him and we worked together before the revolution. Ahmed is a great leader, a trailblazer, he was a dynamo, and was involved in all aspects of aid, political work, military work and I loved him so much. That is why I was determined to go ahead with the operation. I will enter forcefully to catch up with Ahmad today, God willing. The important thing was that we got there. On the borders of As-Suwayda, there is a camp in an area called Lahtha. We reached its borders, but we weren't able to enter because of the fighting that took place two or three days earlier between the Druze and the people in the area, and some of them were killed and some were captured, and all cars were hijacked/stolen. We stayed there until 1:00-2:00 at night trying to find someone to show us the way. When we couldn't get in we withdrew.

A few days later, I was concocting a plan with Abd al-Salam al-Sheikhani (Abu Yazan), may he rest in peace. He said: We go there alone. I said to him: How do we go alone? He said: We'll go there and pretend that we're going to get bread or hay or anything else. Abu Yazan had cancer and was being treated with acupuncture so that he could stand on his feet. I told him: Okay. He took me with him because I know everyone there and I was the one who coordinated with everyone. We agreed to do the operation on our own next week, but I was injured on the Friday that followed, and the operation was halted.

A group of families tried to cross the border, but were caught by the regime's elements and were imprisoned. We wanted to liberate them, but we could not. A random battle took place.

Later, when I was in the hospital, I read a story on TV about the liberation of the Zayzun Brigade and saw our young men there. I called to ask what happened, and I learned that Abd al-Salam al-Sheikhani had entered the secret service as a collector of scrap, aluminum, antique copper, and dry bread. Al-Sheikhani was a large man with a white beard, wearing a keffiyeh on his head, unsuspecting. He drove a Kia 4000. He bought scrap bits as a cover. He returned at night and led the battalion, and in the early morning he had completed his mission. He was a great mind, one of the great Palestinian leaders we lost because of cancer, he wasn't able to go to Jordan for treatment, so he returned to Daraa until his death.

### **My injury and my departure to Jordan**

With the beginning of 2013, the regime's brutality in killing civilians increased, and airstrikes were frequent, and were carried out on almost a daily basis, and of course car IEDs targeted gatherings such as mosques and markets. And I had seen some of them, such as the bombing that took place in front of the Al-Hussein Mosque in Daraa, where a number of young men from the camp lost their lives, including Issam Abu Al-Hajj and a young man from the Aba Zaid family, and many young people in the area were injured.

On Friday, 18 January, I went to the mosque to pray, and there was an appointment between me and someone to go to Jaha. We didn't pray Friday because we expected that the system would put cars for us. The demonstration came out of the mosque, from which demonstrations always took place. We were walking with someone else and I when the car exploded, I thought someone had shot us, I saw a lot of dust and said it was a missile. After arriving in Jordan, I knew it was a car bomb. Friends of mine who were nearby heard the sound of the explosion, so they immediately came and took me to the field hospital, which only treated simple treatments such as applying a bandage or suturing the wounds. They transferred me to a hospital in Jordan because I was wanted by the regime. Fifteen minutes after the first explosion, a second explosion occurred in a street parallel to the first car and about twenty-five meters between the two cars. The first was parked in front of the mosque, and the second, witnesses said, was coming from the military security's side. The regime had closed all roads, even side ones, and no cars were allowed to enter or leave except from one checkpoint.



The license plate was from Homs, I think it was a jeep. The military's security booby-trapped it, and when it arrived, it exploded with everyone in it, and we didn't know who was inside. Someone whose name I don't remember died, a poor mentally unstable man who was by the side of the car and the young men recognized him from the many rings he was wearing. Chunks of flesh reached the fourth floor from the force of the explosion. Many injuries occurred.

Why were we so sure that the military security booby-trapped the car? Because there were similar accidents. For example, there was an accident, I think in 2014 or 2015, of a bus on the Daraa Muzayrib line. A person from the Al-Sarouji family had a bus on which he was working. The Military Security took him, imprisoned him, and detained the bus. A week later, they released him. He said he wanted the bus. They told him, "Bring one hundred thousand pounds to take it." He managed to collect the amount, and it occurred to him to take his family on a "trip" after recovering the bus. He took his mother, wife and children and left a little girl who was playing with the neighbors. They went and paid the money and took the bus. Shortly after they left, the bus exploded. I had written a report on this subject, the whole family had died and only the little girl who was with the neighbors survived.

The Syrian regime is very good at booby-trapping cars and plays. Highly brutal criminals. They killed people simply because they suspected them or their family names. In the battle of the Daraa camp outpost, they bombed us terribly despite the presence of their officers and members. We said to them: Have you seen your regime? We and you may die with his missiles.

I entered Jordan with a Syrian identity because Jordan prevents Palestinians from entry. The Syrian enters asylum or transit as he wants, but the Palestinian is prohibited from entering. So usually wounded Palestinians entered Jordan with Syrian names. One wounded Palestinian man crossed the Jordanian border as a Syrian, and when the border security found a Palestine tattoo on his arm, they immediately returned him to Syria.

## Continuing to be Active

After a while, brother Ayman Abu Hashem (Abu Kanaan) called me. He wanted someone from Daraa camp to communicate with him, so some young men gave him my name. In fact, I had researched him before the revolution, and heard good things about him. Among the people who recommended me to Ayman was Ahmed Koussa. Ayman told me in his call that they work in a support network for the camps, collecting aid and distributing it not



only in Daraa camp, but in Muzayrib and Jallin camps as well, and everyone who escaped from the camps was able to reach them and seek their help.

We decided, including Abu Kanaan and Ramez al-Sahli, to form a group called the General Authority for Palestinian Refugees affiliated with the Interim Government. Support stopped completely.

After the last battle that took place in Daraa and people leaving in 2018, I started thinking about emigrating to Europe. Before that, I was thinking of going back to Daraa, as my family and friends were there. But after the battle, some of them died, and some went to Idlib, Turkey, or farther away.

Our revolution and all the Arab revolutions must win until we return to our places that must be safe. We will be responsible for them and therefore they will be safe. We don't like killing and we don't want to kill anyone. The regime started killing us and committing massacres against us. We became familiar with the sight of a tank in the street because of the regime. We knew the missiles because of it. Even children began to distinguish between the types of bullets: "Hey, a sniper bullet, this is a Russian bullet..." Even little girls knew the types of weapons because of the regime. The Arab countries and the neighboring countries are all sinners, even Russia. The planning is American and the execution is Russian. This is my personal view.

What I am sure of is that the revolution is a right and that right cannot be defeated. Therefore, the Syrian revolution will win despite all the mistakes that were committed, disadvantages and negatives, and despite the fact that we have lost thousands of men, women and children.

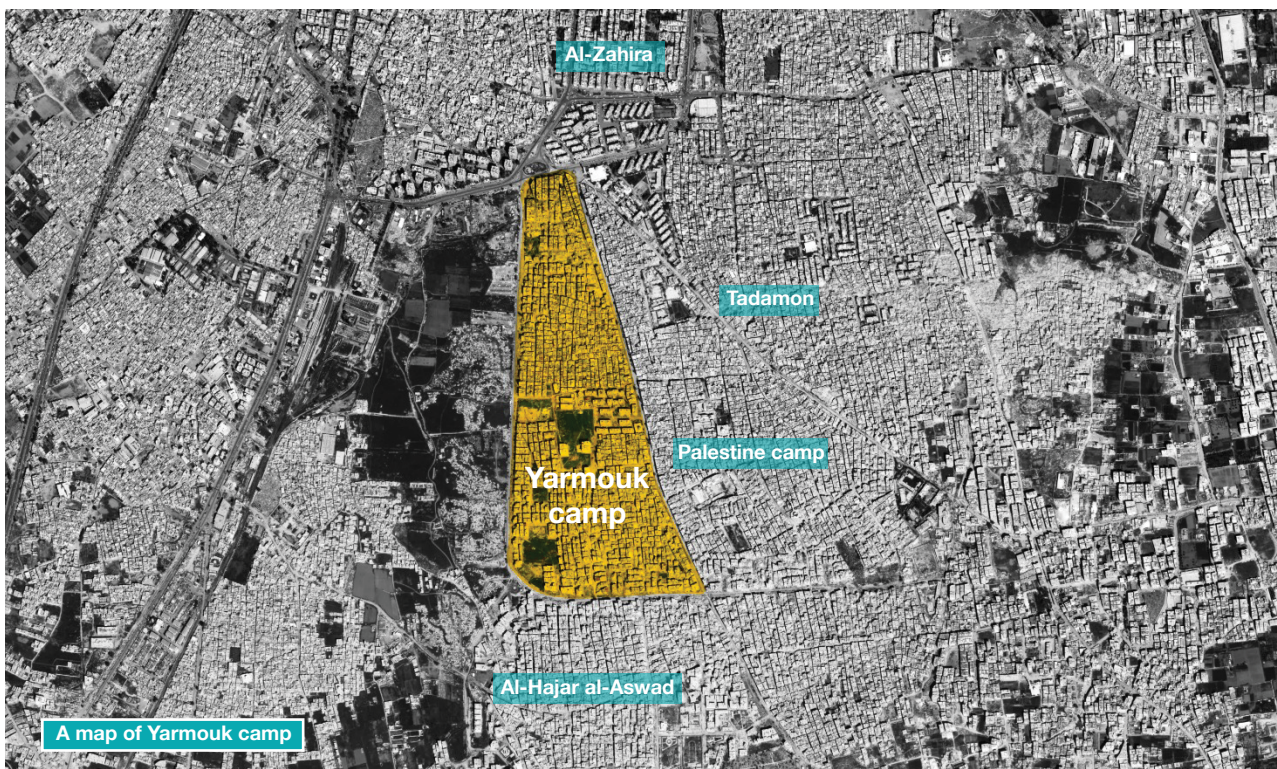
But the Syrian revolution is right, and it will triumph, God willing, despite all the obstacles.

## How many houses on earth does a boy have?

They were peaceful and normal rallies, but what happened after them was frightening, the dialogue was no longer in words, but became with weapons

I am Um Hala. Syrian-Palestinian. I am fifty years old. I have a degree in Arabic and I was a teacher in Syria. My origins go back to the city of Tiberias in Palestine, which is famous for its lake and for fish. Tiberias is an elegant, ancient and very beautiful city.

### Memories of Yarmouk camp



I grew up in Yarmouk camp, which is divided into two main streets; Palestine Street and Yarmouk Street. We used to live in the Palestine neighborhood, in a quarter called Abu Hassan. All Palestinians know it, next to the Palestine Roundabout, on an avenue called Al-Tantora. We lived in a spacious courtyard. We were able to see the sky. My father loved gardening very much; he planted some fruit trees, and vegetables such as parsley and mint in little pots. We had a grape vine that covered almost the whole house.

We were a big family of eleven people. My father was a humble employee, so our financial situation was difficult. My father's job was simple, his salary was low, and was our only breadwinner. However, thanks to God and my mother's keenness to provide all our requirements, she was able to raise us in the best manner. We all studied, learned and took certificates at the behest of my mum and dad who cared about us so much.

The majority of the residents of our neighborhood were Palestinians. We have many memories with our neighbors' children. They used to come to us in the morning to go to school and come back together. We used to play in the lane together like one big family. In our area everyone was helpful. No one distinguished between a brother, sister or neighbor. As one family, we stood by each other on all occasions, whether happy or sad. The love between us, the friendliness and the Arab brotherhood was great. The camp is a great loss.

When we first lived in the camp, the houses of the neighborhood were all similar. But after a period of time, the place developed and became abuzz with a great urban movement; courtyard houses were replaced by buildings consisting of four or five floors, and each floor contained two or three apartments. We also had many markets and new stores, and we no longer needed to leave the camp to buy anything. Everything was available at the camp; jewelers, clothing, shoes, restaurants, hummus and shawarma stores. Wonderful shops.

At first we knew all our neighbors. But later, due to the great urban development, many people came to live in the camp. Some sold their homes in Damascus or its countryside and bought homes in the camp. The camp was no different from any other developed city. Although the word camp implies that it contains tents and that it lacks basic services, this idea is wrong. The services we had were wonderful and available, from electricity to water and others. Previously, we had to go to Damascus to shop for Eid or for school supplies, but after the change and development in the camp, we no longer went to Salhiya, Bab Touma, or Hamidiyah in Damascus. Everything became available and of all kinds at the camp.

I feel proud to be Palestinian. I am proud of my city Tiberias and all Palestinian cities. In Yarmouk camp, and because of our great love for Palestine, we named most of the streets after Palestinian cities. For example, we used to live on Al-Tantora Avenue, named after the Palestinian city of Al-Tantora. There is also Safed street, Beersheba street, Lubieh street – all names of Palestinian cities. By doing that, we were trying to revive these cities to introduce them to the new generations who don't know Palestine. Even UNRWA schools were named after Palestinian cities so that the new generation became familiar with them.

In Syria, our weekends were on Friday and Saturday. We used to go from Thursday evening to my family's house, stay up together, eat and see the family and the neighbors. The whole family was gathering at this time. The next day we would get up early to drink coffee with my father, mother and sisters, talking about our day-to-day lives, what was going on with us, and so on. Then we used to prepare breakfast, which consisted of fava beans with tahini, falafel and fattah. And we were all helping each other. Then we drank coffee, talked, and chose a lunch that we all prepared. We are very famous for maqluba which we often ate in our gatherings. We also used to make spinach pastry a lot. Molokhia is also one of our famous dishes, and mansaf and musakhan. These are our most famous meals in Palestine, but what's more important is that one family gathers with all its children with much happiness and love. We've always shared lunches, and spent time together in a cozy atmosphere filled with friendly chatter and plenty of humor and laughter until everyone is full.

This is how we used to spend the weekends. During the week we did not see each other, everyone was working and our children were in school. We used to bring our children to the family gathering so that they could get acquainted from their childhood with each other and their family, and to get used to these family relationships. They are supposed to come and spend time with their grandfather and grandmother and the rest of the family to get acquainted with them and their lives. If any of us had a problem, we would all consult each other until we found a solution to it. One of us may not know how to act in a situation, so we would give her the solution. We were happy, but now the same family is separated. Each one in a different corner of the country/world.

It is customary that at a young man's wedding his relatives and friends would celebrate it two or three days before the wedding day. They used to gather from the afternoon time, bring chairs, clean the courtyard in front of the house, prepare coffee, tea and all kinds of beverages, bring people who would play instruments, and would sing, dance, and stay up late to make the groom happy. Women also used to sing inside the house to make the groom and his family feel welcome.

These celebrations lasted for three days. On the night of the wedding, they would come to the groom with henna, sing to him, dance and celebrate. The groom's family and relatives would never leave him.

In cases of death, we also supported each other. There was no difference between neighbors and friends. The love and intimacy was great, and everyone was there for each other, supporting each other fully. An important feature of Palestinians is magnanimity and generosity. Not only towards neighbors or acquaintances, they would also help everyone who needed help even if it was a stranger. They do not distinguish between a relative or a



neighbor and do not abandon anyone's call for help, even if they were a stranger.

I used to live in the Tadamon neighborhood, in the nearby Tuesday market on Daaboul Street, between Yarmouk camp and the Palestine refugee camp. This area is close to the town of Yalda. I was very happy with my house despite its modesty. We were surrounded by high-rise buildings and my house was the only "courtyard" house in the neighborhood. It consisted of two rooms and a salon (living room).

## The Start of Events

Towards the end of 2011, protests began to break out in my area. At first they were going out in peaceful demonstrations. After Friday prayers, young people gathered and roamed the streets. They were in small numbers first, and then they increased as others joined them even if they didn't know what was going on.

The demonstrations were peaceful. We were going out to see them and didn't know what was happening. This situation continued for a few months. But what happened after that was frightening, and dialogue was no longer with words, but rather with weapons. We got so scared, we couldn't sleep at home on Friday nights. For example, I used to take me and my daughter's things and go to my sister's house or my family's house in the camp, and I felt safe there. I was very afraid. I'm even afraid of bullets at weddings. We would stay there until Saturday and go home. The next day I would drop my daughter off at school. But we used to spend Thursdays and Fridays with jittery nerves.

I didn't know exactly what was going on and didn't take part in any demonstration. I was far from all this and wished I could always stay away. I have an absolutely unnatural fear, and everyone around me knows that I am so afraid that I cannot participate in such things. When I heard that such incidents could happen in the area I was in, I would leave immediately. The important thing is that my daughter and I were able to get away. I used to hear about guys and girls putting up worrying signs in the market where I lived. I also heard about leaflets that were thrown from the plane in Al-Tadamon area, asking the residents to evacuate the area, and that whoever stays will be responsible for their own life. I never received any leaflets despite living in the area.

One day, while I was at home, a friend called me. We were studying together in Yalda. She asked me: "Where are you?" She knew that I was a resident of Tadamon. I told her, "I am at home." And she asked me to leave the area immediately. I asked her about the reason, and she said, "Didn't you hear that there could be fighting and problems in Tadamon?" I told her: "No, I haven't heard anything about that. I read the news, but they didn't say

anything.” She told me: “A tip, do not sleep at home today.” Then my sister called and asked me where I was, and when I told her she said, “Get out of your house immediately. Try as quickly as possible to get out of the house.” So I took some clothes and took my daughter and went to my family in Palestine camp. We felt safer there. I stayed with my sisters for a while.

One day my brother called, and he and his wife were staying with his wife’s family, and told me that my mother was alone in the house and that I should go to her. My mother was diabetic and is almost blind, and was alone in the house. When my daughter and I went there, a fight broke out. My new home was next to a mosque. They were waiting on Friday after the worshipers went out to gather. I was looking and saw them gathering in the two neighborhoods, young men wearing keffiyehs on their heads. They were saying, “Come on, let’s start.” Whenever I went out on both my balconies, from both sides to see them, I found that their number increased, young and old. There were children there as well, although they were innocent and didn’t know what was happening. After the Friday prayer, there was a lot of shooting, continuous shooting. We went in to hide. I searched for my daughter all over the house, and found her hiding and crying in the closet, and I had locked the door on her, almost suffocating with fear. We never expected that to happen. We didn’t even dare move between rooms, as the sounds of bullets filled the background. A little boy behind our house was sniped and no one dared to help him until the incident ended after several hours. My daughter and I wanted to hide in the inner room but I couldn’t leave my mother alone if, God forbid, she was hit by a stray bullet. We got back to the living room. My mother sat there and said: “God guides the mind, God changes this situation for the best.” We ran inside when the bullets got too close and she was left alone. Her movement became heavy and we could not help her. Then she said to me: “Come, I will hug you. We will die together, we will live together.” And we embraced. We stayed like this, extremely stressed until it was over. From twelve noon until nine in the evening we were surrounded by bullets. Two shots entered the house, one through the window and the other through the bathroom window — if anyone had been inside they would have been killed instantly. When things calmed down a bit and we breathed a sigh of relief, my brother came to check on us, he knows I’m a fearful person. He told me: “I was afraid for you.” I told him: “Praise be to God, God will help us. But I am in the area and I can no longer sit for a second.” That day we went to my sister’s house, who lives in Yarmouk. Her home is not far from Tadamon and Palestine refugee camps. I wasn’t surprised that there were so many people there taking shelter. Her in-laws, sister-in-law, my brothers, their children and their wives. Her house became like a camp and we barely fit there.

## Displacement Began

Then I heard them say that the camp will be raided. When I heard that something might happen in the area I was in, I took my daughter and left the area immediately. I have a sister who lived in Jaramana, so I called her and we left. Out of my concern, I did not wait for the service. I stopped a taxi and got in, even though I hadn't been there before and didn't know the area.

We arrived in Jaramana to be surprised by the atmosphere, while life in the camp was extremely stressful and dangerous, in Jaramana it was completely normal; Markets and restaurants were open, people were drinking matteh, and the streets were full of cars.

I stayed in Jaramana with my sister for about two or three months, after which I would go back to the camp for a short time. By that time they started cutting off the electricity. My niece came back to confirm that the camp would be subjected to a great and terrifying raid, "May God protect us from it." I stopped a taxi and went back to my sister in Jaramana immediately. I stayed there for a while and by that time there were bombings in Jaramana. The area is very close to al-Maliha in Eastern Ghouta. They were bombing Al-Maliha, and we could hear the shelling passing over our heads. They sometimes shelled Jaramana, saying that these strikes were a "mistake." We didn't know what was happening. The shelling targeted Jaramana, but it was not as intense as the rest of the regions. One night I sat on the stairs out of fear. The shelling was too much, we weren't harmed, but the sounds were terrifying. I didn't know where exactly was the target, was it al-Maliha or the airport. I told my sister that I could no longer stay there; I went to Qudsaya that night. I had a sister living there. I have many sisters.

Qudsaya was safe at the time, given that it got its share of shelling at a previous time. Its people had left, some of them traveled and some of them changed neighborhoods. That is why a large part of the camp's people ended up in Qudsaya. My sister, for example, has seven daughters who left the camp and resided there with their husbands and children. I stayed there for about two months.

My husband built a house in Manshiyat Khan Eshieh. His family's house was in the same area and was empty after they traveled to Jordan. My sister-in-law was also living there, with her husband and children. I stayed there for two days, but I felt that my presence there wasn't welcome. People could not stand each other in these periods and they made their guests uncomfortable. Although it was just me and my little girl in first grade. They were sent to Jordan to bring the key to my in-laws' house, so we lived there, since it contained furniture. Our furniture was still in our house in Tadamon, we left everything there when we left the house with only our clothes.

My husband was self-employed and most of his work was in Damascus. That's why he came back late and we stayed alone until he came back. Unfortunately for me, when we lived there, they established a new cemetery right across from the house, and the distance between the house and the cemetery was three or four meters, and there was no wall. They brought corpses every day; young men, children, women and police. They brought them day and night. A terrible thing. Behind the cemetery were farms, and next to them was a playground. On the other side of the house was an olive field. The area was empty and the houses were scattered far from each other. The area was still a village and its services were not efficient. Its terrain was rocky, uncultivable; That is why they had to dig more than once to open a suitable grave. One day, while we were having breakfast, some fights and shootings took place in front of our door. Then we heard that the Free Army entered the area. There is a military unit on the side where we live. The shellings once again were getting closer, and danger reached our area.

My husband has a second sister who lived in the Beit Saber area who came to visit us. During her visit there were problems and shootings, and we were afraid that the situation would escalate. So she offered us all to go with her to Saber's house. Her husband said that their area was completely safe and that they did not hear a single shot. They asked me to accompany them so that my daughter and I would not be alone. After things calmed down a bit, I opened the door of the house to survey the situation. I saw the people in the neighborhood loading their things into cars to leave Manshiyya. The sight of them leaving was terrifying.

We went with them and the road was very tiring. We had to maneuver out of the lanes and cross an olive grove to get to the main street. There was also a river that we had to cross and dive into the water. On the street we could see nothing but cars full of soldiers scattered under the trees. Their sight was terrifying and indicated that great and frightening battles would take place in the area.

About half an hour later a pickup carrying hay passed by. Our cousin asked him to drive us out of this area only and we actually got in the back of the car with the hay. We didn't have a problem, the important thing was to be safe.

The driver dropped us off after we drove away a bit from the area. We thanked him and went back to walk until we found another car. On our way we saw very old and rusty tanks that they had taken out to lubricate. It looked scary. The important thing is that the man with us stopped a car and asked the driver to take us to Saber's house. The driver said that he could not enter the area since he was Palestinian, but that he would drive us to Mafraq. Beit Saber is very close to the border with "Israel" and only the town locals were



allowed to enter it. They do not allow the entry of strangers or those with a Palestinian ID.

The owner of the car drove us to the entrance of the area and we had to look for another car. Our relative is an employee at Al-Mowasat Hospital. He used to go in the morning and come back in the afternoon, so everyone at the checkpoints knew him. Fortunately for us, a neighbor of theirs was driving back and saw us. He offered to drive us. We climbed into the large trunk of the car. One of the members of the checkpoint opened the box to search it and shone the flashlight on us one by one. He found that they were all women and children. He asked the owner of the car and the man with us: "Are there any strangers with you?" They told him: "No, there is no one else." Everyone in the car was Syrian except for me, I am Palestinian. If they searched us, they would have let everyone in, even my daughter, and I would have had to return. The officer said: "God is with you." Thank God we got in and left.

We stayed in Beit Saber for about two weeks, and they assured us that the area was completely safe until a car bomb containing a huge amount of explosives, about a thousand kilos, exploded. At that time, the Free Army might have entered the Sa'sa' branch and blew it up<sup>[7]</sup>. There were two car bombs, but the second did not detonate. We were sitting watching the news, around the time for Maghrib prayer, when the explosion happened. And from the severity of its strength, the doors of the house almost came out of their place. The man and his young sons wanted to go out to find out what had happened where the explosion took place. I told them: "Don't go. There might be a second explosion, and there will be a clash and shooting." I managed to persuade them to stay in place, and they did not leave. That day the shooting continued until dawn.

The next day, I told them: "I am also in the area, and I can no longer stay here, it's becoming too dangerous." I left Beit Saber and went back to Manshiyat Khan Eshieh even though I never felt safe there. But it had gotten a little quieter there.

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[7] - On January ,2013 ,24 Jabhat al-Nusra attacked Branch 221 of the Military Intelligence ,known as the Sa'sa 'Branch ,and blew it up.

## A visit to Al-Tadamon

My husband said that I should bring some things out of Tadamon since we left all the furniture and our electrical appliances there and only brought our clothes. He said they did not object to women entering the area.

At that time, Al-Tadamon had become a very dangerous area and was subjected to shelling, and there were mass graves there. Anyone who entered that neighborhood was as good as disappeared, and those who left it were as good as reborn. I went to get some furniture and I was afraid to go into the area. My sister-in-law was with me after I told here I was afraid to go there alone.

We walked from Yarmouk camp to Palestine camp and everything was normal. When we entered Al-Tadamon, the area was empty. Every four or five lanes we find someone on the street. Buildings were destroyed, windows and doors were missing, shops were burned, and the streets were filled with rubble.

We were more afraid the closer we got to arriving; We could no longer see anyone around us. The view was terrifying. We got home. I put the key in the door and I was afraid that they had turned the house into a military ward, and that we would find armed men, weapons, or corpses there. I was very worried about being able to get access into our house easily. But we went in to find everything as it is. Even the fan was working as we left it and nothing was missing from our stuff, thank God. My sister's husband disassembled the closet and arranged it so that we could move it, and I packed our things into bags. While we were there, there was a shooting, so we quickly got out and went to Yarmouk. On the second day we came back to continue. After we had prepared most of the things, we put them at the entrance of the lane in preparation for taking them out. The sound of shelling and warplanes became louder, so we left. We came back on the third day after we agreed with a friend of my sister-in-law to bring his car to pick up our things. He said we had to get approval to get the furniture out so the checkpoints would let us pass. Because if I take my things and I do not have the approval of the regime, they will take them at the checkpoints. I went to the specialized district to get the approval paper. They asked me where I lived and where I wanted to go? They gave me the approval and said to try to leave the area before noon. We had to go very early the next day. We took the first batch of belongings from Tadamon to Palestine camp. The more we walked, the more checkpoints stopped us, but the approval was with me and my papers were all in order. They asked us about the furniture and where we got it from? And where we were going, and what proof do we have for the validity of these papers. We managed to move the first batch of things

with great effort. Inside the camp were the checkpoints of the popular committees, and outside the camp were the checkpoints of the regime. When we got out of the camp to Al-Zahira, the shooting started. I was so afraid I told the driver to postpone bringing the rest of the things until tomorrow, but he said that then I would need a new approval, so it is better to continue today. I had to accompany them because the papers were in my name. The important thing is that we went back again and loaded the second batch, and some things that I gave up out of fear for myself and those with me remained. I was afraid that they would get hurt because of me, God forbid.

## To Lebanon

I left Manshiyya and went back to my sister's house in Qudsaya and stayed there for a while. After a while, I met a friend of mine from Al-Tadamon who lived in Qudsaya, and she said to me: "There is no safe area in Syria that I know of. What do you think about considering Lebanon? By being present the first day and the second day, they give you approval, and the third day you travel." I liked the idea. I said I will travel and try my luck there and rest from this atmosphere. I couldn't sleep from the horror. I stayed awake until everyone around me took pity on me.

My sister's husband wanted to obtain a travel permit for his daughter and her husband in the camp to enter Lebanon and travel from there to Thailand. I asked him to help me too. If they give me a permit to enter Lebanon, I will go with them. This is what happened. They asked him to get back to them after a day or two. I got approved the first time. And so we came to Tripoli in 2013.

I experienced a lot of hardships. The first was at the border because of my daughter's guardianship card. But the problem was finally resolved and we crossed the border. Similar to how I was displaced in Syria from region to region, I was displaced from house to house in Lebanon. But at least in Syria I used to go to my family, sisters, my husband's family and my relatives, while here I started moving from one place to another and living in shared houses where I did not know any of the residents. I had to deal with everyone around me according to their personality and character, and to take into account those in the house and deal with their attitudes, even if this was at the expense of my nerves and my daughter.

Some time after our arrival, a dispute arose between two areas in Tripoli; Jabal Mohsen and Tabbaneh. They were also enemies, throwing missiles at each other. What we left behind we found again, to the point that we regretted our exit from Syria. Once again we

ran from house to house. Also, whenever I heard a sound near the house in which I live, I would go somewhere else. It was very difficult. I enrolled my daughter in a school a little nearer to this area. And when I heard the sounds of bombardment, I ran to get her. I ran in the street to get her. The school principal was surprised at one time and asked me why I wanted to take her? I told her: "Do you not hear the bombing?" She said, "No, my area is far away." I told her, "How far away are you? The sound of bullets and shells is nearby." One time we heard that a bomb hit the roof of the school, but it happened on a holiday and no one was hurt. The situation continued like this between the two areas until the area notables intervened and reconciled both areas so that we could live in some safety.

### **Suffering Discrimination and Exploitation**

After my arrival I went to register with UNRWA. The employee asked me about my education and my profession. I submitted my papers and answered her questions. She said she would offer me a job as a teacher in an UNRWA school. She submitted the request and said to wait until approval came from Beirut. After a while, she called to tell me that my request was rejected. First, because of their excess applications and the lack of vacancies, and the second reason is that the priority in employment is for the people of the country; for the Palestinians of Beddawi camp or Nahr al-Bared camp.

They hired Palestinian-Syrians, but with a very small percentage, two percent are Syrians and the rest were from Lebanon. I also submitted job applications to kindergartens to work as a kindergarten supervisor or even a children's bus supervisor. It was also rejected. I tried hard to find a job and did not succeed, all my applications were rejected.

Here they bully the Syrians a lot. They say: "You came and took our livelihoods and shared our homes." Although we even pay for the water we drink. If they could, they would have filled the air in cans and sold it to us. Nothing is for free here.

They made us feel that we were strangers and that we were taking jobs from them. Although the Lebanese-Palestinians are banned from practicing eighty professions; such as government jobs, and for example, those who studied medicine were prohibited from opening a clinic in their name, but were working in the name of a Lebanese person. They were also deprived of ownership, so they had to register their homes and cars under other names. However, despite their persecution, they were trying to persecute us. They did not take into account that we are one people, but they said that we are Syrians. I wonder if the country was their country, what would they do to us?

Even our children, if they wanted to play with their children in the neighborhood, they would tell them: “You are Syrians,” meaning, “You are beneath us. You are homeless.” My daughter became mentally ill; Wherever she went, the children did not allow her to play with them. They told her: “You are Syrian, do not play with us.” She couldn’t cry and didn’t tell me. All this put her under so much pressure. We were tormented so much in the shared houses that we eventually were able to move to a private house of our own, thank God.

UNRWA pays us to rent the house and gives us food allowance. However, even UNRWA began to distinguish between the resident Lebanese Palestinian and the Palestinian-Syrian refugees. We knew that they would pay forty dollars one time for every Palestinian under the age of eighteen or for everyone who studies. We were happy at first and said the amount would help a little. But they did not spend the forty dollars except for residents only, and they excluded the Palestinian-Syrians. We weren’t quiet about it. We staged sit-ins to demand our rights. We are also Palestinians. We are already refugees. We pay the rent of the houses in which we live and suffer from the high prices and the high price of the dollar. We could not get by without work. We have no resources except what UNRWA pays. Residents own their own homes, meaning they don’t pay rent. They are all self-employed and have shops, even the women have shops.

But our demands were not met. They were asking for support for us, but they were giving it to others. They asked us to send our names and data, and when we sent to them what they wanted, support arrived, but they gave it to residents of Nahr al-Bared or to Beddawi. When we arrived, UNRWA gave us assistance cards worth one hundred dollars in rent allowance and about forty thousand Lebanese pounds for each person in food allowance. But they canceled the rent allowance after a while. We protested and told them that we had small children and that if we did not pay the owner of the house would kick us out into the street. Almost four or five months after the sit-in, they started supporting us with rent again.

After that, we started protesting to demand immigration. We told them to provide us with opportunities to emigrate if they did not give us our rights to live in dignity in a comfortable atmosphere that would compensate us for the homes we lost and our families we lost. They refused and told us that we should demand the right of return and not humanitarian asylum or immigration. They want to continue demanding the right of return because they want to stay in their positions, but our immigration does not suit them. They live like kings, their offices are like ministers’ offices. As for the Palestinian-Syrian refugee, he is deprived of resources. He can hardly secure basic necessities such as food, drink, school and winter supplies, especially in this period due to the rise in the dollar and the terrible price tag.

Now they pay us \$100 in rent and \$12 and a half per person per month. At first they paid monthly, now they pay every three months. During this period, we have to borrow until it is time to pay.

The residents are taking advantage of us. One time I rented a house that served as nothing more than a shelter. Even the owner had left it after sewage flooded the place, and he said that he would rent it to a Syrian. On that day, I was forced to rent it, and there was someone who pointed me to him, so I came and rented the place. After I lived in the house, the owner started telling me that he was worried that the sewers would flood, but he did not say that they were originally flooded. I asked the neighbors and they told me. His wife told me: "Submit us a request to renovate the house in your name, we want to fix it. And I actually submitted the request. A week or two later, a delegation came from a department called Social Relief, who specialize in home repair. They examined the house and found many faults in it. The iron door was ajar and carved a large circle in the tiles when it was opened. Windows needed improvement, sink faucets were extremely old, mixers were very old, power switches were musty, there was no water tank, the interior room had no door, and the wall's paint was worn off. In short it was in shambles. The contractor asked me: "What do you want us to do for you?"

The owners of the house started saying: Tell him such-and-such, and I actually said what he asked of me. You stay with the workers. And so I did. And in the process I assumed the roles of a blacksmith, a painter, and cleaner. I was bringing the workers coffee, tea, water and cleaning supplies. I told the owner of the house to stay with them and that I would sit with his wife until they finish their work, but he refused and said, "No, I'd rather clean the staircase", and so he left me with the workers. I contributed to this restoration process in all its details, including paint, concrete and cement, without exception, and I could not believe that it was complete.

At first I lived according to our agreement to stay for a year without paying the rent, and then either I stayed with paying the rent or I left the house and moved to another. But, after two or three months, they said that they would move in with me. I said to the owner of the house: How? The house has only two rooms, and you and your wife have two daughters? Where will you live? What about me and my daughter? He replied that I would stay with my daughter in the bedroom and they would sleep in the living room. I told him: "Okay, but what if one wants to go to the bathroom? He said: "This is the situation, either accept it or leave. Everyone is telling me that Syrian woman ripped you off, she seized the house and stayed in it." I was so angry. He wanted to evict me during the month of Ramadan. I said I would not leave in Ramadan. I will stay until the end of the month and then look for



a house. I finally left feeling overwhelmed. They took advantage of me. Although people told me that the owner of the house was a good guy, and he even took anti-depressants. They deceived me until I repaired the house for them in my name, then they kicked me out and moved in instead, and I had to look for another house.

Once they organized a psychological support session for us. They asked us questions like “What forced you to leave? What do you wish for? What do you like to take with you from the camp?” There are those who said: “I wish I took the refrigerator.” One said: “I wish I took the washing machine.” A third woman said: “I wish I took our photos because most of my family died, my sisters and my children.” And she started crying...

## In search of Homs

The authority in Syria considered every Palestinian camp a ticking time bomb

My name is Rae'd al-Toba. From Al-Adeen camp in Homs. I am from Palestine, the destroyed village of Saffuriyya. I was born in the camp in 1966, and I studied in its primary and middle schools, then I went to high school in the city because there were no secondary schools in the camp. Unfortunately, I did not complete my studies, I was preoccupied with political and military work, and my circumstances also did not allow me. I worked as an accountant in a private auto parts company.

### Returnee (Adeen) camp



I grew up in a very miserable canton-like camp. And yet the camp was a ray of light in a sullen city. We knew this after we were able to navigate that city. Even the city's poets, writers or philosophers found their outlet in the camp. It was a haven for the Homsis elites, al-Tayyib Tizini, may God have mercy on him, one of the most important hundred philosophers on earth, found no outlet except in the camp to talk about his ideas. Poets Shakir Mutlaq, Alaeddin Abd al-Mawla and others came to the camp to recite their poems. The breathing space in Homs was very small and narrow.

It was the camp that shaped my consciousness and the consciousness of an entire generation. The Palestinian cause was at the heart and essence of this experience that we lived. We lost our identity. Since I was young I have struggled with the issue of identity; who am I? And how should I realize myself as a Palestinian with an independent identity and not a refugee. Asylum status has accompanied me until now while I am residing in Germany. I always said to my German friends around me, as I said: I am a “double” refugee, now a refugee and I was a refugee in Syria. The camp shaped my awareness and shaped my political and intellectual convictions. It was a great school for me, full of movement, political ideas and constant field discussion. Any terrace in a home was always an independent space to discuss the Palestinian cause with all its tragedies and heroisms, with all its joys and sorrows.

The camp was originally a stable for French horses. It was an octagon-shaped dome barracks made of zinko (Tutia), the most popular metal in our childhood. They divided the stable into small rooms separated by sheets and blankets that were distributed by the agency or the French army, and each family had a room. This was how the camp was first established.

We stayed in a lane called the Saffra lane. Such as Jourat Al-Tarashiha in Burj Al-Barajneh camp, or Al-Tarashiha neighborhood in Al-Nairab camp. There was also Al-Shajarna neighborhood, Al-Safadieh neighborhood, and Al-Tarashiha neighborhood. I grew up in a family with my father, mother, and seven children — four girls and three boys. My father was working at a gas station, near the camp. My mother was a housewife. I was influenced by my mother since I lived with her more than my father, who died in early 1978.

I accompanied my father until his death. I would go with him to the gas station and there we would sell maamoul, soda pop and similar things. I still remember the cars that used to come for shopping in Homs and go to Tripoli or to Lebanon. The old Lebanese cars were exactly like those of the civil war.

I remember that Samira Tawfik once passed by the gas station where my father works, and he asked her to sing him a song for her that I no longer remember. But he remained proud of this, and kept telling his friends that she had come to the gas station and sang for him. This happened in the morning, and Samira Tawfik sang out of respect for my father’s wish.

I undoubtedly had a miserable childhood. I did not know of such things like a vacation, because on holidays I would go help my father at the gas station. I had to help him in the summer and there was no other choice. Either that or sell boiled corn. Naturally, after my father’s death, our financial situation deteriorated, and I had to work while I was still in the fourth or fifth grade. Before his death there was a source of livelihood, but he was gone.

## Saffuriyya and the Naqba Generation

Saffuriyya is an area full of citrus fruits, especially pomegranates. The Saffouri pomegranate is famous, it also has lemon and orange trees, and also olives, albeit in small quantities. This is from an economic point of view. Its residents worked in agriculture and owned livestock such as cows and sheep. They did not have sanitary water supplied to the houses, but the village contained a well like any other village. From this well they brought water for drinking or washing, the well was called Beer Al-Dawiya. My father was a rebel and was always present in Khaldiyah, a dense and frightening wooded area at night adjacent to Saffuriyya. He and his friends were always there. He told me that he was running away from customs and traditions. An eastern and rural patriarchal society, in which the elderly always wanted to be in control.

My mom and dad told me about weddings. About the night of henna, and how the celebration lasted for six or seven days. Also there was the circumcision process. The circumciser coming to circumcise the children was a great event. The Saffouri circumciser is present in Damascus, Marrakesh, Pakistan and anywhere. But not everyone whose surname is Saffouri descends from Saffuriyya, but it is an old story about the wife of the Prophet Moses, whose name was Saffura, and she wanted to circumcise her son with a flint stone. This story is found in the old chapter number four, verse 25-26: “When Saffura came, she cut her son’s foreskin with a stone.”

The conversations with my father, mother, uncles and relatives about the Nakba are still engraved in my memory to this day. When they were talking, and we were young, we would sit and listen quietly. These conversations were always conducted on intimate social occasions such as marriage, big or small feasts, and circumcisions.

Ignorance is what prompted them to leave Saffuriyya. This is my analysis. Arab radio stations talked about massacres like the Deir Yassin massacre, and hateful rumors spread about the Haganah and Arjun gangs and how they raped women, killed children, and other brutalities. Of course, they feared a lot for their children that they would be slaughtered or their stomachs slashed, and like any Arab, to also protect their women and their honor. The rumors were big at the time. In addition to this, the Salvation Army promised them that they would not leave their homes for more than a week, so they left. Some of them took the key to their house or brought a bed with him, i.e. they only took simple things or

nothing. My grandfather left his cows after feeding them for a few days, hoping to return soon. Refugees who were expelled from their homes and wandered from village to village. My family arrived in Marjayoun and they did not want to rent a house, but stayed in a tent in the orchards of Marjayoun, because they were convinced that they would return after four or five days. But the Lebanese gendarmerie, in cooperation with the French, picked them up in locomotives and sent them towards the Lebanese and Syrian cities. Most of the people of Saffuriyya were distributed in Al-Hilweh camp and Nahr al-Bared camp, and some of them went to Yarmouk camp. As for my father and uncles, all of them were sent to the camp in Homs.

The first generation of the Nakba never changed its habits. Celebrations such as Eid al-Adha or Eid al-Fitr, and on occasions of weddings, purifications and others, adults gather and it becomes immediately clear who is the oldest and who is the youngest, who speaks and who is silent. He was meeting then, fifty or sixty men, of them, and offered tea. These were the customs of others and not only the people of Saffuriyya. . These were new ideas to the camp.

Personally, I came out from under my father's wing, so to speak, and came to know new ideas, and the factions played a major role in this; both Fronts<sup>[8]</sup> and Fatih. These ideas have shaken the convictions and constants that we inherited from our people and from our patriarchal conservative society. That is why the role of the factions was very wonderful for me, through whom I got to know new faces and ideas, to reach the city in a safer and better way. We are communicating with the elites of the city and not with the general public who view us as the son of the city views the refugee, the issue that my father, uncles and the first generation of the Nakba suffered in general. These new ideas came and made us see the universe and people in another way.

## **The Camp and the Revolution**

The first martyr from the camp in the Syrian revolution was Walid al-Sayyid<sup>[9]</sup>. He was martyred in the Shammaas neighborhood near us, he was participating in the demonstration when the intelligence checkpoint opened fire and was killed by their bullets. It was a peaceful demonstration, a group of young people just shouting and yet they were shot at,

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[8] The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

[9] He was martyred on Friday ,July.2011 ,1

which blew up the situation even more.

The authority in Syria has always considered every Palestinian camp a ticking time bomb. They were already convinced that the camp would be the first to set off a revolution or it would break out through it. By 99.9%, Homs camp was supportive of and in agreement with the demands of the Syrian people for freedom and dignity. Of course, we had those who were cooperating with the Assad regime, its agents, and informants who harmed many of the camp's residents, but the camp in general was with the revolution with heart and soul.

The Mukhabarat in Homs, in particular, had "red eyes" on the camp. They considered it impossible not to be armed and plan something, even though the camp was very peaceful at the beginning of the revolution. Young people went out in two or three demonstrations, destroying the building of the refugee institution, which was always a center for intelligence that relied on this institution when they wanted to arrest anyone. The enterprise was already an advanced detachment of intelligence in the camp. Therefore, they destroyed it in the reactions after the martyrdom of Walid. Public opinion in the camp was inclined to the fact that it - that is, the camp - should be a safe haven for those who were displaced from old Homs.

At the intelligence checkpoints, when they knew from our identities that we were Palestinians, our situation was ambiguous. The regime says that it supports the liberation of Palestine, and this means that it is with us, but at the same time the sectarian outlook was present, as the Palestinians are "Sunni." We do not know this sectarianism and have not been contaminated by it as Palestinians. Things continued like this in the first month, even though the issue for us was settled before the revolution. The camp is with the revolution, but in its peaceful form. In the first three months after the start of the revolution, the camp was boiling. Then the new asylum began, and the camp became home to forty thousand or fifty thousand people, after the displaced people came from the old people of Homs, and also came from the countryside towns that were subjected to the Assad bombardment.

We formed a committee and we used to drive a van to Yarmouk camp. Khaled Al-Camp (Khaled Bakrawi), may God have mercy on him, Fadi Khattab and some other young people used to fill the entire van for us so that we could bring it to Homs camp and distribute most of it to the displaced. This went on until 2012, 2013. On a narrow level, we were a group of just four or five girls and guys. There were others who worked in the Red Crescent or UNRWA and others. I had created a page called Faces from the Camp, in which I photographed queues at night with candles due to the power outage. The agency distrib-



uted aid to Palestinian families, although it was limited, but there was aid, because after 2014, no one left the camp except to die. With regard to the displaced, the Syrian Red Crescent had very respectful young people from the camp who distributed aid to them.

We did not represent any organization, but we were taking a paper from Salah Abbas (Abu Muhammad) from the General Command. He would give me a piece of paper so that we could cross the intelligence and army checkpoints easily and without problems. Abu Muhammad Salah, a freed prisoner, was the official in charge of the General Command in Homs, and he died recently. We have always linked the General Command, the Thunderbolt, and the Mukhabarat, automatically and spontaneously. In the camp, Abu Muhammad and I often disagreed politically. In the office of the General Command, I told him that I am with the Syrian revolution, whether it is oppressed or oppressing, and a heated discussion took place. But I respect him, he did not harm anyone from the camp, but was trying to get detainees out of the intelligence services, but they did not get out. He had white hands and I do not like to associate him with the General Command, and I told him this. Abu Muhammad gave another idea about the general leadership in Homs camp exclusively. Everyone in the camp before the revolution respected him. We didn't feel like it was the GC that we know. He was patriotic and was always with the people of the camp. The informants played the worst role, the director of the General Organization for Refugees, Ghassan Atta Hassoun, and some petty informants who were reporting people, and more than a hundred young men from the camp were victims of their slayings. And after the crisis intensified, I expected that my name would be wanted at the checkpoints, so I no longer left the camp.

The Syrian authority was convinced of an idea, which I heard from a very loyal person who was Syrian and not Palestinian and occupies a prominent position, that in the camp there are tunnels built by Hamas, and that we have barricades and heavy weapons, and that these weapons can bomb a neighborhood next to us, which is the Nuzha neighborhood in which the “gracious community”<sup>[10]</sup> lives.

My friends were staying in this neighborhood. We used to go every Thursday and drink alcohol there with friends of the honorable sect and others. We were from several sects. We did not know if this person was an Alawite or a Christian. We stayed up together with them or with us, but the regime loves intimidation.

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[10] A metaphor used among Syrians for the Alawite sect.

## No to Arms

I remember that on one of the holidays, young people wanted to set up swings, and to install them they needed sandbags, so they filled the bags and put them. The matter reached the intelligence officer, who is currently a senior security official named Hossam Louka, that the camp was arming and setting up barricades! Young men were photographed carrying the ten sandbags, which were small sacks that were not suitable for barricades, and what was inside was a sculptor, a material used for construction with cement, not sand for barricades. Despite this, the news was passed to the intelligence that the camp was arming and setting up barricades. Something funny.

The factions and the camp's notables, who are the national figures in it, had the greatest role in controlling the camp. They said we want our relationship with the state and its institutions to be sound, because these institutions serve the country. They also played a major role in making clear that we are not armed, nor are we the southern suburbs so that we have tunnels and sandbags.

Hamas had a major role in the camp before the revolution, with its ideas that found their place with the retreat of the left, and it had a large mass reach in the camp and in the rest of the camps, I believe. At the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, the intelligence services knew exactly the weight of Hamas, which is why the camp was accused of digging tunnels. Here the role of the factions and dignitaries was great that we had nothing to do with this, at least officially. Whoever came to the camp came for accommodation only. And we don't want weapons in the camp.

The first demonstration against arms in Homs came out in the camp. I had great discussions with the opponents who came to the camp or with those I met in the hospital when my son was injured, that arming is the trap that the regime wants to set us in, but in the end the regime did not leave any chance for reconciliation or peace. Personally, I was against the idea of armed action, and I consider that the regime dragged the opposition into this trap. There may be many justifications for the opposition to use weapons, but I am convinced that we will lose in this regard. This regime is backed by Russia, and I and many others have been expecting the Russians and Iranians to intervene from the start. Since 2011, we have expected that neither Russia nor Iran will be satisfied with observing the regime as it faces its fate.

There were only three armed men in the camp, one of whom was Wissam al-Sayed, Abu Walid, who was martyred. His father took up arms in response, even though his weapon was an old rifle that fired no more than one or two rounds. and with him two of his friends; Ramy Sobhia and Ahmed Al Shaabi.

Those who took up arms in the camp only. Everyone knows that the weapons they owned used to fire only a few shots and they were done. They never shot or killed anyone. With them was a young man from Yarmouk camp who had come to Homs camp for a visit by a bad coincidence<sup>[11]</sup>. The security forces stormed the area and surrounded the house for two days and opened fire. After mediation by one of the camp's youth, the men surrendered to the security forces who had kidnapped Umm Walid and the remaining young sisters. This happened in 2015, that is, after the people of old Homs took green buses to Idlib. These three were the only gunmen left in all of Homs, so the security forces stormed the camp, with the help of the institution, surrounded the house and took the men. In the branch, they put dollars and modern and deadly weapons, and they were portrayed as a terrorist group that came to participate in the global conspiracy against Syria, and then they killed them within minutes.

### The camp under siege

From late 2013 until mid-2014 I did not leave the camp. The checkpoint at the camp door was checking IDs and I was wanted. In addition, the Saiqa office<sup>[12]</sup> was the center of the military, political, or joint security detachment. I do not know exactly, and the elements used to sleep in the detachment with their weapons and mechanisms. And when they arrested someone, they took him to this detachment.

A large part of the camp detainees were martyred under torture, without trial or a lawyer, and they were never brought to justice. Some of them were killed minutes after their arrest. None of the 100 martyrs I know have ever been charged. The so-called popular committees were small sectarian groups frolicking in the city, the way the Israelis thought; You are Palestinian, so you should be arrested and die. This was their method at the checkpoints. That is why most of the young men who were martyred were killed minutes after their arrest, or they arrived at the branch and were killed there. I know the names of dozens of those who were arrested and whose fate is still unknown, so far we do not know whether they died or are still alive. A person named Muhammad Darwish, nicknamed Abu Nayef, received the news of his death and his family and wife held a funeral for him, and they received news confirming that he was alive. His family doubted the matter, and they paid a lot to dig his grave and make sure, and the body was indeed Abu Nayef. They saw signs of torture on his body, his stomach was slit all the way out. Many tragedies occurred at the time in the camp.

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[11] Abdul-Razzaq Amayri

[12] Vanguard of the People's Liberation War - Thunderbolt Forces :A Palestinian organization loyal to the ruling Baath Party in Syria.

We had to circumvent the security restrictions to be able to bring food and drink. The camp's population has increased a lot. It now contains 50,000 people after its population did not exceed 12,000. Whoever was able to leave the camp used to go to get food. Since the vegetable markets in old Homs were closed, so those who were able to leave went to the western countryside, where the "gracious community" allowed them to buy and sell. Of course, they were subjected to extortion, kidnapping and a lot of harassment.

I opened a coffee shop, after I took the agency of Bin Al Hasnaa from Yarmouk. The road-blocks were to be paid tribute or 'khawa'. For example, if I ask for one hundred kilograms of coffee, I will reach ninety, and the rest will be taken by the checkpoints. Bribes allowed anyone to pass, even if it was required. Any kind of bribe was enough. A liter of adulterated whiskey, two packs of mate, or a cruise of long red cigarettes would do the trick.

UNRWA continued its educational role. I remember that the matriculation examination took place in the UNRWA preparatory schools. The teaching staff was keen to continue the educational process, while UNRWA was governed by security. I remember that we met the Director of UNRWA in the camp, we had to find solutions to the problem of garbage, which spread widely, causing problems for the residents. In the camp there are cleaners who collect garbage and put it in containers that are full and no longer fit. We discovered that the issue had to do with the camp manager who wanted to contract with "Trix", at that time no one dared to rent large cars to load garbage and pass it through the checkpoints that were checking the identities of people and where they come from and where they go, and they may be killed. The agency put out the tender for the camp manager to come and take it. On his way, the car would go out of the city to throw garbage, as security was widespread in the suburbs. One of the shabiha rented a truck for five or ten thousand, and the cost was recorded at one hundred thousand on official papers, at a time when a dollar was worth seventy pounds. And no one could take the tender except for the camp manager, who was sharing a city security officer and sharing the thefts.

We experienced frequent water cuts, and this was one of the system's stressful methods. There was also a power outage, the electricity network was old and the load on it increased after the large increase in the population. Some of the camp's youth donated to repair it after the state's absence and its complete withdrawal from the camp, even the collectors of water and electricity no longer came. We were hoping for them to come, we had no problem with them, we wanted to enter state institutions. Our demands were freedom, not the absence of the state. But it withdrew from all of Homs and not only from the camp.

I still remember that young Homsis who stood at the National Hospital roundabout, after the traffic policeman ran away as a result of shooting even at them by the intelligence, so

this young man came and organized the traffic. People who never lacked sophistication and culture, all they wanted was freedom and freedom only. In the camp also, some young people formed a group to fix the faults that were occurring. There were no major internet or phone outages, this was a great source of information for the system. At that time, energy alternatives, batteries, small chargers and lids for lighting, spread, and its trade flourished. They were unforgettable days.

## The Path to Migration

I left the camp, my son and I, around September 10, 2014. We did not take the traditional route because of its danger. We went out with a young man from Hama camp who was a first lieutenant in the General Command, working to get people out for \$200 per person. Which is no longer a secret after his arrest. I knew him from the days of the army, so I called him and agreed with him. He came by car from Hama camp to Homs. We went out early in the morning with the workers so that we wouldn't notice the checkpoint. The workers of the fertilizer, Homs refinery and military construction were going to work early. Any checkpoint would let us pass as soon as he saw the General Command ID. even the mightiest of barriers; The 60th Street Checkpoint, and we called it the Barbara Checkpoint, in reference to the famous Phalange checkpoint in Lebanon in the past. The Sixty Barrier was very abhorrent and sectarian. As soon as its members knew that someone was Palestinian, they immediately assumed the existence of the money in order to travel to Turkey, so they slaughtered it after taking the money with him. Because of their stupidity, these checkpoints remind me of the barriers of the Arab deterrence forces in Lebanon. The last checkpoint belonged to the air security. The element was happy because my son's name is Majd, not Jihad or Omar, for example. Unfortunately, this was their view. He asked me where to go, so I said to our relatives in Neirab camp, since things are calmer there. He told me: "Brother, save us and go back to Palestine. What are you doing here? There is a job in Palestine." Believing that we can get in the car and go back to Palestine, simply that.

In this way, I reached Al-Marqab Castle, which was among the opposition areas, and we continued to Turkey. We stayed in Mersin for about ten or fifteen days, then went to Italy by sea, but the boat broke down with us and they put us down in Cyprus.

My wife stayed in Homs, but the rest of the family is another matter. My son Baha traveled to Holland and he had gone out before us by sea. He was a university student but he left his studies. My eldest son, Nidal, had been shot in the stomach in the famous Al-Sa'a massacre, so we had to take him to the Social Welfare Hospital in the Al-Waer neighborhood, which was an area opposed and besieged by the regime. We took him in and

received prosthetic treatments and took him back to Homs camp, but he had to complete his treatment. He managed to escape to Lebanon with the help of his friends, and there he worked as a designer in a famous electronic newspaper called Al-Modon, about a year ago. From Lebanon, he traveled to Turkey, as he possessed a passport belonging to the authority, and from Turkey he went to Greece and from there to Germany. My youngest son and I have been stuck in Cyprus for a year and two months. They gave us residency, passports and all the rights of refugees. This was the first experience of Cyprus in the issue of asylum in cooperation with the European Union. But Europe was our target. Because of a problem that occurred with us in Cyprus, we delayed leaving it.

At that time I wrote a letter to the King of Sweden and posted it on Facebook. In it I spoke about our lives and our nights out, about my children who are my friends and how we used to talk about everything, and I told them about many of my experiences. Our evenings were wonderful. In our house there is a kitchen with a bar in which we used to sit and talk in an intimate and touching atmosphere. I told him about my great lack of this atmosphere, the smell of dawn that peeked from the window, the voices of children going to UNRWA schools, the waves of friends, the Friday rituals when I was preparing beans or crumbs for my family. The big family meeting When we used to meet every week to spend the night with my brothers and their children, and the place was full of conversations on politics, philosophy, religion and poetry. I apologized to the king for the possibility that we might insult him when we burn with the fire of alienation. However, I said that I was dreaming of traveling to Sweden, which is a symbol of Europe.

After complex travels, the family is now reunited in Germany. My son came from Holland to celebrate with us for the New Year holidays. I have a daughter who was in Saudi Arabia, but she joined us and is now residing in Germany.

## In Goslar, Germany

We currently live in a very beautiful city called Goslar. A quiet city, very similar to Homs. Its people are kind, simple and very respectful. I have many friends from the community or from German elites and I am proud of that. I have a good relationship with the Arab community that has been residing here for a long time. As for the Germans, this is another issue. In general, they are with the refugees, but we may differ on political issues. Whoever I maintain my relationship with love us and stand with our cause. The standard of my relationship with the Germans is Palästina nicht Israel. I always told them: "Where there is dignity and freedom for a person, it is his homeland." They used to say: Consider that your homeland is here and forget Palestine. Thinking that the issue is only a car and a house



and food and drink. They used to say to me: You are Palestinian, what is your relationship to the Syrian issue? Or questions of the type: Why do you support Castro, in Venezuela or South Africa? Great historical injustice and massive propaganda here. Six years ago, I found only one German woman who, since she is a leftist, could accept these ideas. The rest are still sympathetic to the Israelis.

I am currently in my fourth year of general nursing (Pflegefachkraft Generalestig). In Lower Saxony (Niedersachsen) in which I live, it was an exception to pay someone my age so that he could take up vocational training. So far, I do not receive an apprenticeship allowance, Berufsausbildungsbeihilfe (BAA). I signed a contract with the nursing home (Altersheim) here for three years, whereby they would give me a training stipend to work and train. The work system here is divided between 60% of the work and training in a regular hospital (Krankenhaus) or children's accommodation (Kinderheim) such as for people with cancer or in a nursing home (Seniorenheim). This is my field for four years and I stayed for one year. Sixty percent of the time is work and the rest is theoretical.

I was brokered to learn a profession. Wasta (nepotism) here is not as we understand it in our country. After arriving in Germany I worked for two years as a volunteer, helping people with their papers and translating them in an agency called the Voluntary Agency for Refugee Assistance in the city of Goslar (Freiwillige Agentur Goslar). I also went to a school for Goethe children in Goetheschule Goslar and helped newly arrived Arab children who still did not know German understand what their teachers were saying. It was this volunteer work that helped me to allow me to do an Ausbildung at my age.

I have never been discriminated against here. In the school where I am, twenty Germans, young men and women, treat me with no insults or racism. Goslar is a beautiful city and its people are kind. They didn't make me feel like an Ausländer (outsider) at all, they treated me like one of them and I'm proud of that.

I met new people in primary school, a great school. I would go into the classrooms with Arab children, with the female teachers, of course, and explain to them what the lady wanted to teach them. These students were among those who had not yet entered school because there were no schools in the camps, so they went straight to the Grundschule, i.e. primary education.

I also volunteered at the Das Schwimmbad in Oker- Goslar swimming pool. Here there is no employee in the pool to collect tickets, so I worked in the pool on the box, and I still work every year when the pool opens in September.

Since I was young or younger my mother used to tell me that I should live in the land of the infidels. I used to feel that everything in our societies was wrong, even in the camp my relationships were limited despite my popularity, but the depression was fatal.

This country is the country of the rule of law. Here we felt our humanity in every sense of the word. We were not human. And I say it to the “we were living” group: We were not human. I joined a party called Die Basis, which is a fledgling party, but it did not succeed in the recent Bundestag elections. In the local city council elections, Merkel’s party failed and my brother-in-law was one of its candidates. The whole list failed, and the opposing party succeeded; Schultz. I was very happy when I saw the former governor giving the new governor a rose and the people applauding. This was in Goslar Square. Schulz, the current chancellor, also presented Merkel with a bouquet of roses. In this simple way, the story ended, the delivery was completed and everyone went back to work. Even if I lived for two hundred years, I would never forget this. In our memory, power is delivered only by tanks and blood. This is what was happening and we know it. I was very happy with this high spirit that I saw, but my heartbreak was also great.

I do not doubt that I will return to Syria but not for the final stay. I hope to visit it when it is free. The regime and its supporters are betting on the continuation of Assad and authoritarianism forever, and this is impossible.

I remember a wonderful speech by the late Salama Kaileh, “For the sake of Palestine, we want to overthrow the regime.” Palestine cannot be liberated with such dilapidated regimes. For a long time I used to smuggle into Lebanon and enter from the Arida area. Homs is close to Tripoli. I used to travel twice a week by bribery I gave to an officer with the rank of colonel, in exchange for a liter of adulterated whiskey or a box of Marlboro cigarettes. He would take me in his car and drive me to Homs without identity or any kind of identification papers. This regime is corrupt and dilapidated. It is being gnawed by the mites and all the intelligence services are gnawing at it, and it cannot liberate Palestine or the Golan.

That is why we want to rely on a strong system that comes through fair ballot boxes and not by tanks. When there is a free and independent regime, only then will we be able to rely on it with a major operation such as the liberation of Palestine.

## The Story of Yarmouk Camp

**Because of the siege, three or four people were dying every day, including women and children**

My name is Mohamed Bader. I am fifty years old. In Damascus, I had a certified legal office and was an arbitrator in the Syrian courts. I am currently working as a human rights activist. I was studying in law school but I could not finish my studies due to circumstances. I am from Haifa in Palestine. I was born in Yarmouk camp, Syria, as one of the third generation of my parents who have been displaced since 1948. Currently, I am in the northern countryside of Aleppo, in a village called Qatma, located between Azaz and Afrin.

### Memories of the Camp

The main Yarmouk Street was of a commercial nature. The camp has a high population density that combines Palestinians and Syrians. The camp developed commercially and became one of the most important commercial and service centers in Damascus. The services there were excellent and complete: schools, clinics, and a commercial market. Infrastructure was excellent. Electricity is good. Services. Telecommunications. The drinking water was from the Ain al-Fijah network.

It is known that the names of the neighborhoods in the Yarmouk camp were the names of Palestinian villages, towns and cities. For example, the neighborhood I used to live in was called the Nazareth neighborhood, and the neighborhood was called Majidel Ain Ghazal. Our house was almost on the main Yarmouk Street. It is a three-storey building that my grandfather built. We, as a family, owned a floor of it and lived in it. In the beginning, before my grandfather allocated an apartment to each of us, he brought the whole family together. We have always gathered on the dining table in the main meals; His sons, wives and children.

After the death of my grandfather, the family members began to move in, each one with his family specialized in an apartment or a bungalow. Palestinian families are known to range on average from four to ten. We were all living in the building in a close social condition; Brothers together, their wives together, and cousins together. That is why I grew up in a social family atmosphere with my uncles and their children. When I got married, and since the house was so big, I had to rent out at first. Then I built in the same house and lived in a

separate apartment next to my mother and sisters. My sisters got married and my mother was left alone. We used to meet there on Fridays, me, my sisters, my sisters' husbands and our sons. Since I live next to her, I used to see her every day and I was the closest to her. Of course, on the first day of the holidays, we would meet at our mother's to break the fast together. I mean, the visits between brothers and sisters were permanent. We used to participate in the occasions that take place in the camp, including joys and sorrows. This is one of the habits of the community. Any occasion for any person or family should be shared by everyone.

Yarmouk camp's relationship with the surrounding areas was strong. We have neighborliness, lineage, unity of condition, and commercial exchange. That is why, at the beginning of the revolution in these areas and the army's siege or attack on them, most of their residents fled to Yarmouk camp. And the matter was not limited to the neighboring areas, but the displacement has taken place from several governorates, the most important of which is Homs. Many of the camp opened their homes and housed the displaced voluntarily, but the problem was the large numbers. Later on, schools were closed and reopened, and mosques opened as well. Some of the old shelters have been reclaimed and the displaced are received there. This regime did not like it and sent several messages to the people of the camp, through some well-known personalities, that you are supposed to expel the displaced since they revolted against the regime. But the camp did not respond, as the people's situation rejects this talk. There is a unity of destiny between us and the Syrians, and these are our neighbors, and between us there is a unity of condition. The order of the regime has been completely rejected, and these figures are not able to stand up to the people's demands. My reception of any displaced person from any region is a personal matter and no one is forcing me to remove him. This regime did not like it and sent several messages to the people of the camp, through some well-known personalities, that you are supposed to expel the displaced since they revolted against the regime. But the camp did not respond, as the people's situation rejects this talk. There is a unity of destiny between us and the Syrians, and these are our neighbors, and between us there is a unity of condition. The order of the regime has been completely rejected, and these figures are not able to stand up to the people's demands.

## The Escalation

On May 15, 2011, people spontaneously rushed towards the Golan border. Three martyrs fell on that day, including Ubaidah Zaghmout, and a large number of wounded. In the following month, on the occasion of the setback on the fifth of June, some Palestinian factions called for the return of the ball and to go to the Golan borders again as a pressure operation on the Israeli entity. This call was rejected by several factions, but it was adopted by the Free Palestine Movement faction responsible for it, Yasser Qashlaq, and the General Command responsible for it, Ahmad Jibril. On the second day, let us be surprised by the buses that came to Thirty Street and the people going with them. The Israelis had learned from the first attack; Unfortunately, there were about twenty-three martyrs, in addition to dozens of injuries. Among the most prominent of those who were martyred on that day, I mention Inas Shuraih. The funeral of the martyrs took place on the second day in a general atmosphere of resentment among the people who considered that the general leadership was the main reason for their downfall. During the funeral, the General Command provoked already shocked and upset people. The impact of the tragedy was great. People could not stand this. They attacked the headquarters of the General Command in the Khalsa area in Yarmouk camp. We considered al-Khalisa an intelligence branch inside the camp. Unfortunately, this attack was met with a violent response from the General Command, so they opened fire on the demonstrators around the headquarters, which led to the deaths and injuries. To burn people exclusive headquarters.

Later, the General Command established the popular committees, which we knew were security committees, because the nature of the General Command was completely supportive of the regime. Unfortunately, these committees began their activities in the camp by arresting some Palestinian activists and others who had a major role in receiving the displaced, facilitating their affairs and alleviating their suffering. In addition, the committees harass the displaced in the camp by arresting them, kidnapping them, torturing them, or handing them over to the security branches. It also had a negative role towards the neighboring regions by deliberately straining relations with them by kidnapping some people from them and restricting their entry to the camp.

And so on until we reach the second stage. I remember that we were in Ramadan just before Iftar, when the regime bombed Al-Ja'una Street with two mortar shells<sup>[13]</sup>. After the first shell landed, people gathered to treat the wounded and carry the dead, so the second

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[13] On 2 August 2012

shell landed in the same place. The number of martyrs was about twenty-one, in addition to dozens of wounded, because al-Ja'una is one of the densely populated neighborhoods. Most of the martyrs I remember among the martyrs were two brothers from the Taluzi family<sup>[14]</sup>, a young man named Rafi' Rifai, as I remember, and a young man from the Taha family.

The frustration of the people and activists increased after this massacre, which prompted them to go out in a large demonstration in the camp, which was met with violence and was targeted with live bullets. Demonstrators were arrested.

### **The MiG Airstrike**

Things remained so tense until December 16, 2012, when the Syrian warplanes targeted the Abdul Qader Al-Husseini Mosque, where dozens of displaced people were. The first strike was at the mosque and the second was at UNRWA schools, which were the center of shelters for the displaced. This strike was known as the MiG strike, and it left many martyrs and wounded. Psychologically, after the targeting is carried out by warplanes; People read that things were going towards a military escalation, so they automatically got frightened, and the next day, a frightening mass exodus from the camp began.

The regime, with the help of some of its agents of the Tashbibih personalities, contributed to creating confusion among the people. They told them to run away with their children to save their lives, as the camp was going to a military escalation. This was the scheme of the regime: to evacuate the camp of its residents to isolate it, as it did in the neighboring areas that it had previously isolated. For the regime, the Yarmouk camp is the lifeline of the area, and it wanted to empty it.

I chose to stay in the camp to continue working on documenting violations. At that time, a youth initiative called the Camps News Networks Union<sup>[15]</sup> was established, and it is almost the first page that spoke on behalf of the Palestinian camps in the shadow of the Syrian revolution. I worked with them about six months before the camp events. I was reporting the abuses and violations committed by the shabeeha committees and members of the regime against the camp's residents and the existing displaced people, all the way to the camp's events and the people's exodus.

After the displacement of most of the camp's residents, a partial siege was imposed on it. Before that, and during the period from December 2012 to July 2013, the camp was

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[14] Two children ,cousins ,Anas and Ibrahim

[15] <https://www.facebook.com/syriancamps>



constantly bombed, targeted and sniped. As the crossings were partially open, arrests, kidnappings and killings of some people took place. As of December 17, the partial siege of the camp began by closing the crossings intermittently and for days. The power was cut off, and then the water was cut off. At that time, we sensed that a great siege awaited the camp. And approximately in the middle of the seventh month of 2013, the total siege was imposed. All crossings were closed and no one could enter or exit, and the camp was completely and permanently surrounded.

## The Siege of Hunger and Death

At the beginning of the siege everyone had some “mouna”. But with the passage of time and the succession of days, this stock began to run out. We started going to our relatives’ and brothers’ homes to take what they left of food or aid. Unfortunately, this stock has also expired, and the bitter and harsh siege has begun, and the inability of any of the camp residents to secure their daily needs of food and drink. About two hundred and twenty people died because of this siege. Three or four people died every day, including women and children. We were communicating with the outside world to document the violations taking place, and also to document the bitter results of the siege on the people of the camp. Despite the cancellation of cell communication towers, we were sometimes able to pick up some signals from adjacent areas, and thus it was possible to make calls. In addition, when the system cut off communications from the camp, it faced a technical problem by canceling the internet portals that were present, and we were using these portals.

The problem with the siege of Yarmouk was that it was very tight and from all sides. I mean, there was not a single humanitarian outlet. This siege gave people very few options for survival that the mind could not comprehend, and unfortunately they became a reality. We had gotten to the point where people fainted on the streets because of hunger, so they would eat anything they could find. One of the most common at the time was the “bird’s foot” plant, which grows on the edges of the roads, and even animals don’t eat it because it contains toxic substances, but hunger forced people to eat it. Unfortunately, there are those who have suffered from side effects because of it, such as swelling of the limbs, bloating and fluid retention, which may lead to death if the person’s immunity is weak.

Even the organizations that worked during the siege were helpless, as they had no materials to give to anyone. I remember that they found a stock of spices and started making a soup from them, which they called the spice soup, consisting of water, spices and flavorings only, meaning that it does not become fattening and does not save from hunger. But people were overwhelmed.

They grew simple things, such as chard, spinach, hibiscus, parsley and mint, in the orchards of the neighboring agricultural areas, Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahem. They are orchards adjacent to Sayeda Zainab. They would go towards these lands hoping to get something of these herbs to fill their stomach. But these orchards were targeted by Shiite militias, the shabiha committees, and the regime. Unfortunately, civilians were targeted, and many of those who went to those orchards to get some form of food were martyred, including children. No pity, no mercy. A child went there to pick up some weeds because of hunger, and was sniped and killed.

We saw these cases because we were documenting abuses. We found them sniped and dead, including women. We managed to pull out the bodies of some, but the others were left. We saw them rotting and the dogs eating their flesh. This is what the Iranian, Lebanese and Iraqi Shiite militias wanted. Their sectarian hatred towards the besieged was terrifying.

We went through unimaginable experiences. I once found old bread that I think was at least a year and a half old. When I picked it up I found that worms had eaten it, and even worms were dead on the bread. It has a moldy layer and was considered contaminated. But because of hunger I had to eat it. I washed it, dried it, ground it, and baked it again until I could eat it.

One day they found a stock of tamarind. It is known that tamarind is inedible in its raw form, as it is a sour substance. But hunger was overwhelming. We had to eat it even though it caused health problems like diarrhea and other issues. We also discovered the synthetic tar material that they used to make sweets in the factories. Because of the loss of sugar, which is one of the most important substances that the body needs for effort and movement, we were forced to eat it directly. It also caused health problems, the most important of which was diarrhea. We reached a stage (I saw it with my own eyes and thank God I did not reach it) that some people slaughtered cats and dogs, cooked them and ate them.

The issue of drinking water was easier. Since the Yarmouk camp by its nature, or the southern region of Damascus in general, is known as a water reservoir. The water was shallow. In addition, almost all the old houses contained a well and a plunger. This was a positive feature. We had wells, submersibles and generators to run the electricity. But there was a problem with the issue of fuel. They followed the example of extracting fuel from plastic like in the Gaza Strip. Indeed, this initiative was tested in the camp and they were able to extract fuels; Gasoline, kerosene and diesel fuel, which powered generators and contributed greatly to the extraction and provision of water.



In early 2014, some messages arrived from the regime that a humanitarian crossing would be opened from Ali al-Wahsh Street overlooking Sayeda Zeinab. We considered this a trap, but some families went out on the first day the crossing was opened. After they left, they communicated with the people in the camp and told them that they were well received and that they provided them with relief and assistance and left them. This prompted thousands of people to go out towards this crossing, and that was the biggest trap. Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan Shiite militias, as well as regime forces, arrested almost everyone who left. I mean, I remember that the number was about 1,500 among the missing and martyrs who tried to leave. Families were treated brutally. We have received some videos and leaks of people who were burned alive. Entire families were burned. In addition to the abuse of people, slaughter, rape and enforced disappearance. Many were arrested by the security branches.

A few days after this incident, and in the first month of 2014, a first aid convoy entered Yarmouk under international and media pressure that was a result of efforts from the camp regarding the issue of the effects of the siege. The first food convoy entered through UNRWA under one of the mandatory provisions of the United Nations. Of course, the regime did not like this; they deliberately created fake clashes between their forces and the opposition factions inside the camp, so that they were forced to stop the distribution. In addition, in view of the harshness of the siege and the deadly hunger experienced in the camp; people lost their minds during the distribution and there were stampedes which led to the death of some people from the crowds, while others were treated for injuries.

This was also an additional reason that contributed to increasing the state of chaos that the regime and the Palestinian factions loyal to it exploited, and they arrested women, children, youth and men. In addition to the many casualties during the fake clashes that they were creating, the regime was saying that they had been attacked by the armed opposition faction forces inside the camp, and that is why they responded. But this was not true, we were present and often documented that the attack was carried out by the regime.

Later, the distribution point was moved from the entrance point in Yarmouk camp to Palestine Street. There were a lot of questions about the reason for this. The indications were that because of pressure from the hateful shabiha of Nisreen Street, who wanted to move the distribution point to their area, to complete the process of arrests and restrictions on civilians. As a result, the arrests that took place from Nisreen Street exceeded the cases that occurred at the entrance to the camp. Because of the regime's approach to fabricating battles and clashes, the amount of assistance that entered the camp did not break the siege.

### ISIS in the camp

After this, ISIS began to be active in the camp. The process of liquidating some prominent figures who worked in the relief, medical and media activism has begun. Abu Suhaib al-Hourani, may God have mercy on him, was assassinated, and he was a medical activist in the Palestine Charitable Organization. They assassinated Abu Muadh al-Sharaan, who was an activist in the Palestine Authority. Also Abu al-Abed Aresha, may God have mercy on him, who was a relief activist. Abu Ahmad al-Hawari is also an activist and one of the figures who was affiliated with a Palestinian faction. Many figures were assassinated by ISIS to end activism in the camp. In the beginning, the militants set out from Hajar Al-Aswad area, which was the stronghold of the organization, and from there they moved with lightning speed. They took control of Yarmouk camp quickly during the fourth month of 2015 and expanded to the Tadamon area. This led to a mass exodus of activists, relief workers, medical and media personnel towards the neighboring towns of Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahem.

One of the forms of ISIS restrictions in Yarmouk camp is that they initially imposed the veil on women and forbade them to go out except with a mahram (male escort). And if they found someone in the streets at the time of prayer, they would force them to enter the mosque using a stick. There was a close monitoring of mobile phones, in addition to spying on homes. Lots of inconveniences happened during that period in which the regime found its golden opportunity. Under the pretext of ISIS, it began striking the camp with

barrel bombs, and increased the intensity of its bombing with various types of weapons, which increased the rate of destruction.

I stayed in the camp for about two months after ISIS took over. I was determined to stay in my house. However, since I was a relief activist and media worker, I was subjected to many harassments. For example, the terrorists were frequently searching me. They confiscated my phone for inspection. They also broke into my house to search it. But what prompted me to leave the camp so quickly was that I was almost sniped. Then I received an official threat from ISIS that they would target me if I did not leave the camp. That is why I left for Yalda around the sixth month of 2014. I stayed there until 2018.

### **My stay in Yalda**

After we left towards the neighboring towns, we found foodstuffs that entered based on the agreements between them and the regime, and through which some items were allowed to enter. The problem was, unfortunately, that some residents of the neighboring towns were adopting a racist approach, with instructions from the regime, of course, to pressure the residents of the camp and the areas that refused a truce with the regime, that no kind of food would be provided to them, or by selling goods at very high prices.

If we compare the reception of the residents of Yarmouk camp with the residents' treatment of us, we can say that they unfortunately received us badly. When the displaced came to the camp, no one was left without shelter. But when the opposite displacement happened, we encountered many camp residents still on the streets. Some even got to the point where they rented out the homes of their traveling relatives in return for a great deal of money for those fleeing with their children from the oppression of ISIS.

I stayed in Yalda. I went to a man who was living outside Yalda, and asked him if he could let us live in his apartment, and if he wanted rent, I would give it to him, but reasonably. The man was kind and said: "Stay. I forgive you from rent until your affairs are released." In Yalda, too, it was subjected to harassment by some factions, because these areas had made a truce, and they wanted to thwart any revolutionary activity. One faction even tried to arrest me and hurt me.



## Displacement in green buses

The regime carried out a massive military operation on Yarmouk under the pretext of ISIS presence. We were in an adjacent area and watched the amount of destruction caused by the Russian and regime forces targeting the camp with all kinds of heavy weapons, war-planes, artillery, explosive hoses and barrels. According to what we saw and followed, the camp was completely destroyed. Later, it was found that the rate of destruction was 80%.

The displacement took place in the fifth month of 2018. Almost a month after the forced displacement in Ghouta. We were communicating with those who were in Ghouta and they told us that we will most likely be part of the same agreement, which is the process of forced displacement for those who do not want a settlement, and those who accept it will remain. As an activist, I had no choice but to be displaced. This is the path I will take, as I do not accept compromise with this criminal regime in any way or form. So I left with my family who stayed with me in the camp and during the siege.

On the way, we were attacked and insulted when we passed the regime areas. The shabiha attacked the buses and hit us with stones. When we reached the liberated areas, they did not drop us in a specific area. We stayed in the buses for two days, going around the liberated areas, until we finally reached Jinderes Road. Thereupon they divided the convoy into two halves; Half left towards Deir Ballut, the second half — us — were taken to the shelter camp in Azaz, where we stayed for about twenty days.

## Difficulties of living in the north

There was no work here. The area had a rural character and no business in it. Here one has to fend for themselves. I lived with my family members, my children went to school and my wife is a housewife.

The problem is that customs are a little different. The host community in which we live treats us as outsiders. They say: “You are not from the people of the region. Your customs are alien to us.” I, as a Palestinian, who was born as a refugee in 1948, meaning that I have been in Syria for seventy-three years, was very surprised when I was treated like a foreigner. They used to tell me, “You’re a foreigner, you’re a refugee.” This was what caused me legal and living problems and a social rift with the community in which I lived.



By virtue of my work as a human rights and humanitarian activist, and when we came here, we Palestinians who came to northern Syria faced a problem with the issue of identification papers. Many of us lost our documents. Some were married and could not confirm their marriage, some of them had unregistered births, people died, and there were no official institutions to record their deaths. That is why we initiated the formation of the Palestinian Refugee Documentation Center through the Interim Government, the General Administration of Civil Affairs, in February 2019. One of the most important tasks of the center was to register the civil incidents of Palestinian refugees and maintain their records, incidents and presence as Palestinian refugees, in addition to providing them with identification papers for legal purposes.

Along with other activists, we also established the Association of Palestinian Displaced Persons in northern Syria. Which took it upon itself to keep abreast of developments with regard to the Palestinians, follow up on their problems and communicate and network with existing civil society institutions and local councils. The most prominent role of the Association was to help assimilate us in the communities in the north, while preserving our identity as well, such as the right to return to Palestine.

By following up on the files in Azaz specifically, we encountered a problem in issuing identification cards through the local council, which dealt with us as foreigners. After solving this problem, the Association initiated a meeting with the Council and a request was submitted to it to appoint a “Mukhtar” for Palestinian families in agreement with the local council and with the existing governmental institutions. Thankfully, he responded and I was appointed as a mukhtar to follow up on Palestinian issues with the local council in Azaz.

We, as Palestinians in northern Syria, have become certain that the solution to our file is linked to the solution of the Syrian file. We are, first and foremost, an important component in this society, and our destiny is linked to the resolution of its cause.

Today the Palestinians in the north are left without legal or international cover. We were abandoned by UNRWA even though it is the international organization concerned with Palestinian refugee affairs. UNRWA abandoned us since 2018, when we left the regime areas. The PLO, which claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, has also abandoned us. We demand that these entities assume their responsibilities towards us. If there is no chance for a radical solution, at least they should find alternative solutions for us. It consists in securing housing for the Palestinian refugee, moving them from tents to preserve their dignity, and securing education, medical care and job opportunities. Knowing that we have already sent formal and informal calls, appeals and

letters to these parties, but they have apparently abandoned us.

I went through two phases of displacement; The first was when I was displaced from Yarmouk camp. I left because ISIS took over. And as they say, “He who leaves his house, his value is reduced.” I was very upset at the time. I mean, I left my home and left my property against my will. But when we went to Yalda, there was still hope that ISIS would be ousted from the camp. Although it was difficult for this to happen, I was in the vicinity and on the outskirts of my house. After the forced displacement to the north, I completely lost hope of returning to my home and to the camp. We lost Yarmouk camp. This loss broke our hearts and shattered our souls so much. No one can describe the difficulty of the feeling of losing the home in which he lived all his life, and in which his memories are with his family, his people, his neighbors, and his community.

This loss caused a psychological problem that we will not recover from until we return to our homes.

## Between a rock and a hard place

**Everyone will be held accountable, everyone will be accountable**

My name is Samer Mustafa. I am sixty six years old, of Palestinian origin from Majidel, Nazareth. I was born in Jobar near Damascus in 1955. We moved to Ein Tarma after my father bought some land there. I lived in Ain Tarma, spent my youth, got married there, and then left it. I studied until the eighth grade of middle school. I was self-employed, and both my brother and I owned a building in Ein Tarma. Each of us owned four apartments that my father built for us and our children. We lived happily and comfortably. Life was good and our situation was very good. In my youth, I used to work in mosaics, drawers and cabinets, but after I got married about ten years, that is, in the nineties, I changed my profession and worked in construction and clothing. I built houses for me and others for us to trade in, to sell and to buy. After we built the houses and improved our conditions, the happy life we used to live ended, and the crisis began in Syria.

### The escalation of the revolution in Ghouta

In 2011 the demonstrations began. They would last for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour and would disappear because the regime was in control. Protests remained civil, peaceful and unarmed for two years. Only demonstrations without weapons, not even a gun, until 2013 when the arming began<sup>[16]</sup>.

They would raid the area at night to arrest those known to have participated in the demonstrations. People were working together, otherwise how can the regime know who participated in the demonstrations? They were provided with reports with the names of the demonstrators, so they would come to take them. Most of those arrested did not return. Whoever is proven to participate did not come out. Prisons are still full of detainees — at least 600,000.

The two sides fought each other and did not have mercy on anyone. We did not know who to satisfy the “buyer or seller” of them. We were labeled either as terrorists or with the regime. We were between a rock and a hard place, not knowing whether to leave Ain Tarma to the regime’s areas, or stay here. It was a miserable life and it was not normal.

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[16] Arming began before that period

I don't know where this issue of someone being Druze, Alawi, Christian, or Sunni came from. Later, matters came to a distinction between the people of the region, he's from Kafr Batna or he's from Jisreen<sup>[17]</sup>.

Neither I nor most Palestinians participated in the revolution, yet I was accused of participating in it. They used to say to us, the Palestinians: "What do you want from us? What do you have to do with interfering with us? We are fighting among each other. What's it to you?" We heard a lot of these words: "Stay out of this, we are fighting among each other." They did not accept our participation. Most of them were victims, whether Palestinians or Syrians. The youth who participated in the demonstrations did not revolt for the sake of the revolution frankly, but rather to get a bundle of bread and help. I mean, it was "Arab chaos" and no one knew what was happening or in whose interest.

## Diary of the siege

When the siege began, we lived a life worse than the lives of animals. Everything we earned in our lives we spent in that period. We would sell our things to buy bread, labneh, or olives. Prices were unreasonable, seven stars as they say. I mean, we sold gold to buy what to feed our children. In those days, whoever could eat barley bread, were considered in good condition. There are those who had to eat moldy bread. We even grinded poultry feed and ate it. We ate cabbage leaves as a substitute for bread when we could no longer find it. The siege was difficult for everyone, the Palestinians and the Syrians alike. The situation was the same for those. For those who smoke, the price of one cigarette reached 1,400SYP.

We were taken advantage of by traders from both sides. When they said: "Al-Manfoush came"<sup>[18]</sup> the prices of goods would go down, and when they said: "Manfoush didn't come" all prices rose at a 100% rate. I do not exclude either side, neither these nor those; We were taken advantage of by both sides.

Once I went to buy dry bread that they were feeding to the cows, and I found the price of one kilo to be 2,200SYP, and some of it was rotten. I wanted to choose the cleanest, and the seller told me that a kilo is 1,500SYP. I said to him: "Put them all together". We used to soak it in water and mix it with a little of the flour we had, knead it again and bake it on the saj.

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[17] Hizzah and Kafr Batnah and Jisreen are all towns in Eastern Ghouta

[18] Muhyiddin al-Manfoush :one of the most prominent traders who used to bring goods into Ghouta during the siege.

One time, on my way back from the mosque, I found loaves of bread with traces of meat on them. It was summer so flies were covering the loaves. I bought them anyway. Someone on the way asked me: "What is this?" I told him: "I'm taking some bread for the chickens." He told me, "Uncle, I want to eat them and I want to take them to my family. We deserve them more than chickens." I told him, "You definitely deserve them more than the chickens." I shared them with him, twelve loaves in total, of which I gave him six. I said to him: "May God bless you, I hope you forgive me." He told me: "Uncle, may God forgive you. You told me that you found them in the trash." And he actually took them and ate them. We lived an incredibly painful life. Poverty and lack of work. We were living by God's plan. Even the fuel, such as gasoline, diesel and kerosene, were extracted from plastic. A life of oppression and a life in which there is neither cleanliness nor the simplest necessities of life. Anyone who saw someone carrying bags would ask them: "What are you carrying? How did you buy it?"

I even made my own version of 'za'atar'. I had pomegranate seeds, and someone said to me: "If you want to throw them away, please give them to me." I told him, "What are you going to do with them?" He said, "I will grind them and make za'atar out of them" I told him: "Because you told me that I will also make za'atar, let's split them between you and me." I dried out the pomegranate seeds and the man gave me some dried chickpeas and we grinded them until they became a powder. We added a few walnuts, if available, and sumac and made za'atar. We ate it and it was acceptable.

Some people worked to distribute aid to benefit themselves and their families. They took what they wanted and gave us what was left. Some were cooking and distributing food. But they did not give us all the assistance they received. They would distribute a portion to us and keep the rest for themselves. I mean, what good did they do if they cooked rice and distributed some plates and took pictures? This rice was humanitarian aid, not from them. They kept the food for themselves. They benefited a lot, and some of them became rich and left with millions when they left Ghouta.

Some people have had contact with organizations or donors; They told them that they were responsible for the lives of many people, and that they were supervising the feeding of a hundred besieged families, in order to send them aid. They were filming the distribution of meals to people, but their homes were filled with tanks of oil and ghee, while we were craving even a small bottle of oil. It is true that Ghouta was besieged, but all things entered it from Damascus through smuggling methods. Merchants controlled smuggling and merchandise. Ghouta became a global trade zone. They bought a bundle of bread from Damascus for 400SYP, to sell it to us for 1,200SYP. Although the distance between

Damascus and Ghouta does not exceed five kilometers. The mistakes were made on both sides, but the mistakes within our communities were more. The factions brought food and items through tunnels. Al-Manfoush also used these tunnels to bring in all goods, of course, for a huge fee.

Then the chemical attack took place, in which many people were killed. Entire families died. The chemical attack took place after midnight, and the massacre was huge. The region was annihilated.

Life became unbearable. Neither side had mercy on us. This has a group and Abu So-and-so has a group. The struggles of Jaysh al-Islam and the Legion were due to tunnel problems. Our youth were victims of these battles. Whoever was with one of these groups would benefit. Of course, commanders only feed their members with crumbs. For example, members of the Legion go to fetch firewood and no one intercepts them. As for me, who is not with anyone, I was harassed and asked questions when they saw me carrying firewood, "Where from? Why?"

Some who had nothing to pay for food had to sell their honor, but it is shameful to talk about these details. Some people died of starvation. I swear to God this is not a metaphor, several people died of starvation.

Electricity was shared by amperes through generators. But after the price hike there were people who could no longer pay. Whoever had money kept their subscription and those who didn't canceled it. Those who did not have electricity charged their mobile phones at the homes of people who had electricity and paid them 50SYP in return. There was an internet connection, so we were communicating and following the news.

## The Military Offensive and Displacement

A military offensive took place that lasted about a month. During which fierce battles took place, the impact of which was very large. The streets were filled with corpses and it was not easy to bury them due to constant airstrikes. Planes were stationed over Ghouta at that time.

Finally, countries intervened, a ceasefire was established, and the buses were brought in. They said, "Those who want to go, leave now, and those who want to stay, stay. Our exit to the north is secured because they are liberated areas, and there are homes and services that will be available to us." We left with a small bag and only some clothes. We were surprised when we arrived that none of what they said was true. They gave us blankets and



a few mattresses. Our situation was similar to that of our people in 1948 when they left Palestine. Our exit to the north was deliberate and decided.

Those who did not have problems with the regime were left. Some hesitated between staying or leaving. Some of them preferred to stay and not leave their home. Some didn't want to continue living the tragedy of those who opposed the regime, and some of them were afraid of the regime's retaliation.

We arrived to the north from Ghouta in two days, not six hours, as the road used to be. The route was reminiscent of our forefathers' journey in 1948. The difference was that it was their enemy who expelled them, but we were expelled by our own people. Weren't we all family in Syria?

On our way, we were attacked, insulted, ridiculed and insulted by the people of some areas that were under regime control. They spat at us.

Upon our arrival at Qalaat al-Madiq, the people there met us with kindness and respect. They gave us everything we needed with great generosity. They often asked us if we needed anything. We went to their homes and showered. They helped us. After that we left to Maarat al-Numan and stayed there for about fifteen days, but we left because we heard that a battle was going to take place there. People are scattered in different areas. We came to Afrin and we are currently residing in Mahmudiyah.

### **This is not a life!**

The difference between life here and life in Damascus is like the difference between heaven and earth. Here, if you work, you eat, and if you do not work, you will not eat. Although there are no job opportunities available. And even if we work, everything is very expensive. On our first day in Afrin, the price of a bundle of bread, containing ten loaves, was 200SYP. Now its price is about 1000SYP, and it contains seven small loaves, one of which is not enough to satisfy a child. But the soul is more valuable than money. I felt compelled to leave my home. We didn't leave voluntarily, we were afraid of the regime since people were writing reports ratting out each other. The goal is to prove to the regime their loyalty, and that is why we got scared and left. We preferred to leave rather than the possibility of being exposed, so my wife and children and I left. I currently live with my son and his wife. Each of my other children live in different places with their family. Some days I sit alone and shut the door on myself and cry. We are scattered and divided. My mother is in a country, my sister is in a country, and my children are all in a different place. My grandchildren do not know them. "What is this life? Life is like a tree. If it is planted and grown, and you do not

see any fruit, your labor will be in vain.”

In Afrin there is no life. Only those who have money can live here, but we are hardly getting by. We were barely nourished. Before that, we used to allocate Friday to certain foods. Now all days of the week are the same. Friday was special; we used to cook maftoul or a potato tray with chicken in the oven or any fatty food. Or mixed grills in an outing. Whoever didn't eat meat, we brought him chicken. We aren't able to afford these things right now. We don't want fish or chicken, we want consumables at least. At the beginning of the olive season, the olive oil was really bad quality and was sold for 4 Turkish liras, so I thought I'd wait a bit. I waited for a bit and then the price went up. Prices increased a lot. When we first came here, the price of a tank of oil was 15,000SYP, now it's 48USD. All that money for a basic food staple!

Currently, I do not work because I have high blood pressure and diabetes and can no longer work. My body is tired and no longer helps me. There is not much to do; Sometimes I go visit my friends to pass the time, and I go to the mosque.

I have two sick sons. One was injured in the stomach and the other has chronic UTIs. They were hit by airstrikes but survived. My eleven year old grandson was killed. He was killed along with seven other children who were playing with him. On that day they hit a barrel that killed seven children. The oldest of them was eleven years old.

The situation is very bad. We do not complain, but the Palestinians who were displaced from Ghouta are all in a bad situation, because they went out with their clothes and did not bring cars or their belongings. We all left our homes and came here in hopes that we would live in normal homes. We live now in the house of “Ali Al-Azm”, and pay 150 Turkish liras for rent. No windows or heating. God only knows. This area is extremely hot in summer and very cold in winter. I can't live in a tent, we are not used to tents. The land here has its owners, and we have no property, land, or livelihood. I wish I could go home and not stay here. I don't feel stable. For the Kurds, if it was up to them, they would not let us stay. They don't like us. Homes are their homes and this is their right, but what do we do with our case and where do we go? I left my house, or else what would bring us here? We hope from God that honorable people will come to take us back to our homes and to return to the people of Afrin their homes. Even if they take rent from us in return for their homes, it is their right. God willing, support will come to them and us.

## Where is UNRWA to support the Palestinians of the North?

For two years now, I have been supported by the organization Shafak. I kept what we needed from the assistance they provided for us, and the rest I sold to get by. However, they haven't supported us for two months, and I honestly don't know how I will survive in these two months. My children are unemployed.”

Even UNRWA is completely absent. They no longer recognize us. Whoever remains in Damascus still receives UNRWA aid, 100,000SYP for each person. But how am I going to get that assistance? They have my name, but they only pay the assistance in-person. As far as I know, aid comes based on the number of people registered. This is what we want to ask UNRWA officials about; there are 200,000 Palestinian families; Some of them are in the north and some are in regime-held areas, and a large part of them have been displaced, “Where is all this money going? To pockets?”

It is enough that health check-ups<sup>[19]</sup> and medicine were free from UNRWA. We go to the clinic here but they don't have medicine. The UNRWA clinic has a dental clinic, but there is no dental clinic in this clinic. The education here is very bad and the teachers themselves need education. As for education provided by UNRWA, it was really of excellent quality that ministers and officers pressured the director to enroll their children in UNRWA schools, and say they were Palestinians. UNRWA is famous for its education and health. Now we request that UNRWA turn to us and consider our problems and have mercy on us. We accept deportation to any country. To put themselves in our shoes, would they accept this life? We accept to live like animals in foreign countries. We want animal rights, not human rights. To get us out of here. I am sure that if they asked the Palestinians who would like to leave, no one will refuse. We wish UNRWA would consider our cases and ask the authority of the Consulate to get us out of this hell and I promise we will manage our affairs and take it from there — but please get us out. Does the authority not know that its people are living in poverty? Let them come and see our situation. We are living the life of dogs. We hope they get us out of here. We do not want a food basket or aid. We just want to leave. If we are able to leave, our children will work. They have enough skills that will enable them to manage their affairs and survive.

We do not dare to contact anyone in Ghouta because if the regime knew, it would harm them. There are those who communicate with those in Damascus, but Ghouta is a special case because it took so long to surrender to the regime. There are other areas that surrendered within two months, and nothing happened to them. They reconciled and now they are living in their homes and they have no problem, but we are afraid of both sides. Am I

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[19] Healthcare

happy to be displaced? Of course not, my house and all my property are in Damascus. What did I gain from being here? What did we gain from their revolution? Nothing. We became beggars. We are disgusted with ourselves.

A person who resides among his family is nothing like the one who resides among strangers. When I was living among my family and community, if I got sick, everyone would come visit me, but here “to each their own”. Everyone is busy making a living. We are no longer what we used to be. The neighbor was like a brother and we offered our meals to each other. Recently, one of the neighbors got married and only three of his family members attended his wedding. “The weddings of the Palestinians are not the same.” My wedding, for example, was a seven-day party, both men and women celebrated, and coffee and tea was offered to everyone.

If we ever went back to Damascus, I want my dignity. I want them to treat us with respect. If I am a criminal, they will hold me accountable. If they ask me why I carried a weapon? To defend myself. And if I am wronged, I want my right. Everyone will be held accountable. Everyone bears responsibility.

## Leaving Khan Al Sheikh

**Who do I want to go back to? To the walls? What should I do with the walls? Who will bring back to me who died?**

I'm Basanda al-Ali, from Gwer Abu Shusha in Palestine. I'm 56 years old. I had a shop in Khan al-Sheikh which helped me survive. I have seven orphaned children. I provided an education for all them, thank God. But I am tired now and my health is deteriorating, so I stay at home and commit to memorizing the Qur'an, el Hamdulillah.

### Growing up in Al-Amin neighborhood in Damascus

The people of this neighborhood were diverse and of more than one religion: Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Palestinians lived among them. We had the sweetest childhood together and didn't discriminate. We were one family, playing with each other, entering each other's homes without being afraid. They weren't afraid of us, and neither were we, until the state expelled the Jews and took their homes and they traveled to Palestine<sup>[20]</sup>. Some of us were communicating with them there, and they said to us: "They made us sit in tents. We used to live like kings, and now we lived in humiliation. We wish we could go back to living together like the old days." From that day they disappeared without any trace. Now the neighborhood is settled by Shiites. They infiltrated the neighborhood gradually until they took over completely. We were observing them. We were able to distinguish them from their clothes. The whole area became filled with Shiites. The number of the remaining Palestinians was very few, and the number of the original population also decreased. Even bakeries — there is a bakery for Shiites and a bakery for the rest. The houses in the neighborhood are all built of stone and are very beautiful. The state put its best efforts there, every period it worked to fortify and restore the houses so that they would not be destroyed. Because of the stone, we did not feel the stinging cold in the winter, nor the scorching heat in the summer.

We used to live in a big courtyard house with more than one family. With us lived displaced people from the Golan and Palestine and from all religions. I wished for every child to live a childhood like the one I lived. Everyone loved one another, and everyone helped one another. The environment was very nice and friendly, but unfortunately it didn't last.

Everyone had their own customs and traditions. For Christians, for example, they drank alcohol, but only in their homes. On the holidays we used to visit them and celebrate with

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[20] No decision was issued to displace Jewish communities and confiscate their property.

them the festivities, and on our holidays they used to visit us and celebrate our festivities. The Jews also had a synagogue in which they prayed. And they have a feast in which they make bread like the “na'em” that we ate in Ramadan<sup>[21]</sup>, and they distributed that bread during their feast. We used to rejoice in it.

My father is a freedom-fighter veteran. He was wounded in 1967. He was penetrated with thirty bullets in his body, but he survived. Years later, when he died, there was still a shrapnel next to the heart. He was retired. He owned a Suzuki that he used to provide for our needs. When he returned from work, he used to take us to picnics in Ghouta or the airport road.

I studied middle school at the Palestine Institute in Al-Amin district. After that, I went to Al-Quds High School in the Bab Touma neighborhood and continued my studies until twelfth grade, but I unfortunately didn't graduate. I wanted to be a lawyer, but I got married. At this age, the girl's desire is to marry and make a life of her own. With the responsibility of the house, children, farming, olive cultivation and vegetables, there was no longer the opportunity for me to continue my education. That is why I did my best to educate my children, and praise be to God, all of them went to college. Now I have a girl in secondary school, and God willing, she will be the one who will achieve what I couldn't.

I got married and lived in a Palestinian camp near Al-Dameer, and lived there for nineteen years until my husband's death. He was a farmer and he inhaled a lot of pesticides he was spraying on crops, which led to a blood infection. Then the infection turned into a malicious substance in his body. We treated him for three years, but he didn't survive. At that time, my family was living in Khan al-Sheikh, so UNRWA helped me build a house next to them and I lived there with my children.

### **The beginning of the revolution**

A few years later, the revolution began in 2011. The events were simple for us, and that is why the people of Yarmouk camp, the people of Yalda, the people of Hajar, the people of Sayyida Zeinab, fled; They all fled to Khan al-Sheikh. People opened their homes and shops to receive the displaced. Even the streets were cleaned. I mean, we tried to offer them every possible assistance we could. May God keep it in the balance of our good deeds. A little later, they started saying that we had armed men, and that there were a lot of shady activities in the camp. People started to leave. Some of them went to Mazzeh, and some went to Jdeideh, and to other regions.

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[21] Matzoth :bread eaten by the Jews during Passover.



The uprising actually occurred in Khan al-Sheih in 2015. There was a faction called Abu Dujana that tried to attack the camp residents, so they stood up to them and formed a brigade called “Al-Ezz Brigade” led by Brother Abu al-Nur<sup>[22]</sup>. The aim of the Al-Ezz Brigade was to protect the civilians in the camp, so that no one would attack them. In fact, they prevented any armed men from entering the camp. The Abu Dujana faction in particular was affiliated with the regime, and they were trying to capture young people to hand them over to the regime, and tried to open certain points in the camp for the regime to enter. Palestinians had nothing to do with this whole issue. “It’s their country after all.” They used to tell us: “We want to take your homes. The country is our country. You are Palestinians. You have no right to any of this.” That is why the young men stood in their faces and said: “As long as one of us is present, it is impossible for us to allow anyone to be harmed, especially girls.” Al-Ezz Brigade brought coats for the girls who weren’t covered to protect them, nothing more, and not out of fanaticism.

We were safe, but the problem was that young people could no longer leave the camp. The country was known to be full of secret service agents. Any one of them would report the names of the young men protecting the camp, so the young men could not get out, as they would be arrested at the checkpoints. That is why women (myself included) used to leave the camp to get their aid from the UNRWA. I brought aid to families who couldn’t leave the camp. I wore a wide cloth belt and a wide coat to smuggle aid. And since I’m not young, they weren’t thoroughly checking me; They just checked my handbag. But they were searching young men and women thoroughly.

My house is located between two buildings, which is why everyone gathered at my house during bombardment. My sister laughed and said to them: “Why do you come to my sister’s Umm Kifah’s house?” They would say: “Her house is the house of orphans, it is sacred and may God protect it.” Glory be to God, despite all the difficulty of what happened, the house was not damaged and neither was the glass. But the tragedy occurred during Lailat al-Qadr on the 25th day of Ramadan, precisely in 2016. A missile landed and bombed a three-storey building next to us that turned it into rubble in seconds. My brother and his five-year-old son were killed while he was praying Fajr. I carried my nephew in my arms — his little body was split into two.

The regime, the Russians and the Mossad hit us. Israel also participated in the strike. These three entities agreed to strike us because Brother Abu al-Nur, the commander of Liwa al-Ezz, who was affiliated with Hamas, was with us in this area. The whole world loved him, and he was doing what pleased God. He was a father to orphans, the needy, and everyone there. He didn’t allow any wrongdoings.

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[22] Izzeldin Hamad

On one occasion, a missile landed in the heart of the camp on a displaced family, injuring their daughter. They tried to help her, but no one dared to leave the camp. I took her to help her and at the checkpoint they asked me: “What happened to this girl?” I told them: “One of the armed men.” This was the word that saved us at the checkpoints. The officer laughed and said: “Why are you lying and saying armed men? We saw the plane when it was bombing.” I told him: “So what do you want, to tell you the truth?” We took her to the Mowasat Hospital, but she died in my arms. May she rest in peace.

The situation was really difficult. We no longer felt safe. We were trying to sleep and couldn't. The whole family was meeting at the entrance to the house when the bombing began. Although he who was destined to die will die. But fear was not easy. The children had hepatitis<sup>[23]</sup> from fear. Most of the children in Khan al-Sheikh got it. We used to wash for prayer in the blink of an eye, in case there were shells hitting the house.

## Partial siege



In Khan al-Sheikh, not a single person went hungry. First, because the entire population are in clans that live according to customs and stockpile everything. And whoever has food, they would happily give it to others. We didn't go hungry, but it was very difficult when they cut off rations of flour and prevented gas from entering, so we started cooking on wood to survive. Khan al-Sheikh area was open from all sides and surrounded by farms and orchards. The checkpoints prevented us from entering anything.

[23] Jaundice

But there was a hidden pathway between Zakia and Khan al-Sheikh. It was among the orchards, and people used it to leave the camp and come back to it on motors or Hyundai cars, but without light and in the dark. Then the regime's 137th division noticed this road and began hunting down people that passed through it, and its name became the Pathway of Death.

This area was under the Free Army's control. But the road from which we used to bring food, flour and gas, which was the only vital outlet to Zakia, was identified by regime snipers. Many young people died. Some of them were going to get gas and they threw incendiaries at them. At least fifteen young men were killed when bringing bread and gas. Also, many families wanted to visit Damascus, and when they went out in the dark they would be sniped.

One day, the Free Army decided to attack the 137th division, but the battle did not last long. They clashed for a few hours and reconciled. They could not find a solution. Whoever died, died, and whoever left, left.

The town of Zakiya next to us made an arrangement with the regime, and were able to enter all sorts of goods to the town. The people of Zakiya took advantage of the people of Khan Al-Sheikh, since they had no other way to bring their things other than from Zakiya. They raised the prices of goods, but they remained within a reasonable range. It was in their interest not to raise the prices too much, otherwise the people of the camp would find an alternative, because it has several other outlets, even if they are dangerous. That is why the people of Zakiya kept their economy running through the people of Khan al-Sheikh. In the camp, there were merchants who brought goods from Zakiya at reasonable prices. They knew the situation of the people. In Khan al-Sheikh no one took advantage of anyone..

People were surviving on UNRWA aid that was arriving every three months. As I said, young people who were unable to leave the camp in fear of checkpoints would give us a power of attorney on their behalf. There was an UNRWA researcher in Khan al-Sheikh who was revealing the name of those people and their inability to leave the area. The aid was sufficient for each person according to their family status, with some rationing, until more aid came later.

Those who were employed outside the camp were allowed to leave in a designated bus, but half of them were arrested on charges of aiding the armed groups. At the Tayyar checkpoint, there was a person with them guiding them to the young men. No one was

able to detect this agent until one of the residents finally recognized him and shot him in the camp. It turned out that he was the one who was snitching on the residents of the camp. There were also women who did not like the situation of being restricted in clothing and movement; and they too, were dealt with.

The Free Army continued to distribute aid until the last moment. Until the day we left, they distributed all they had of ghee, oil, sugar and all food supplies to those who remained there.

Landline communications were completely cut off because the bombing destroyed the building, and so communication was via mobiles only. Whenever we spoke to someone in regime-held areas, lines became jumbled, and we knew that someone was listening in on us. That is why young men did not communicate with anyone there to not cause them harm. The electricity was still there because tensions were within the camp and the camp residents kept them under control. And in any clash that occurred, they would stop the tension, and as a result, they would stop in regime-held areas as well. For five years our electricity did not cut off.

The situation remained this way until Sheikh Abu al-Nur was killed<sup>[24]</sup>, as he was the one who controlled the area and refused any kind of reconciliation. A missile landed on him and he was martyred. At the time, they said, one of the agents had located him. They did not want anyone from Hamas, and Abu al-Nour was from Hamas. Hamas helped all the areas, and helped Khan al-Sheikh camp by sending food supplies, sponsoring orphans and other things.

## The battle followed by displacement

Following the martyrdom of Abu al-Nour, we were being attacked from all sides. The young men fought but their number was few. They were less than two hundred young men protecting the whole camp. The regime thought they were in thousands. I remember asking one of them: “What are they giving you?” He said: 3000SYP. I mean, money was not their goal, but only to protect the people in the camp. There were no fighters left. They were but a few. And then those who got injured, and those who became crippled until there were no fighters left. Then the negotiations took place and they brought the buses. They all left, and no one accepted to reconcile.

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[24] 2 July 2016

Khan al-Sheikh was like a thorn in their side because they could not enter it in any way. The uprising there began in 2015. It lasted for a year and a half until November 2016. No one accepted reconciliation, everyone left. Of course, our exit was not easy. We invested in our homes after all these years. Everything we earned in our lives was in our house, and all of a sudden we lost everything. The situation was tragic, but we left anyway. I have a saying I always say “It’s okay to lose money but never children”. We can compensate for the houses, but how will we compensate for our children? I have girls and I do not guarantee that the regime will not rape them upon entering, as happened in many areas. I have six daughters and one boy. I left for them. I, my son and my daughters, two of whom got married during the siege and left with their husbands and children, and my brothers and the wife of my martyred brother — all left the camp.

I did not allow my son to join the Free Army. But he was helping them dig tunnels to protect the camp if necessary. But I did not accept that he would go out to fight because he was responsible for his six sisters, me, his wife and children. This was the greatest jihad. He had a chicken restaurant, but the regime would never understand; according to the regime, just because we were living among the defectors in the camp, we were definitely with them.

After we boarded the buses, we stayed there for a night before they let us go, as a punishment for the people of the camp. When we got out, the army was happy to get rid of that thorn in their side. They finally got rid of the people of Khan al-Sheikh. They spit on us and cursed us. We did not encounter anything in the regime areas on the road because we traveled at night and arrived at dawn.

We forgot all about our exhaustion with the reception of the people of Qalaat Al-Madiq. They were welcoming in every sense of the word. They had secured houses and aid. We were provided with heaters to keep warm since it was winter, and foam mattresses and everything. Many organizations helped us then. The people there were happy with us.

## **Displacement after displacement**

We found buses waiting for us to immediately take us to Idlib city. We stayed there for about six months, and when the bombing started, we left. We can no longer stand it. I was exhausted and so were my children. We went to Tel Mardikh and stayed there for three months. They started bombing it too, so we left it and went to an area called Salwa and stayed there for two years. There they took all our money. The houses were in a miserable state, yet the lowest rent for a house ranged from 35-50USD.



They took our cards to receive the aid in our names and did not give us any of it. Two years with God as my witness we did not take help from them. Then they said they wanted the house, so we went to the town of Atma and stayed there for fifteen days, which cost us 50USD. So we went back to Afrin and found a house there in a skeletal state without rent, so we lived in it, and we survived, and we have been living there for two and a half years. My son has become the father of five children and is hardly able to provide them with bread. There are no job opportunities here. He, his wife and his sisters had some gold with us, so we sold it and fixed the flooring and installed water and sanitation pipes in the house. The house is small, two rooms, a kitchenette and a bathroom. And now the owner came to demand it, and then told us: "If you want it, buy it."

The Kurds made us feel that we were occupying their city. They didn't understand that we were in a worse situation than them. We hope that the situation will be fixed and that everyone will return to their homes. In addition, we did not choose Afrin, but stayed there by chance because of my son's work. It is not safe either. There are bombings, and SDF<sup>[25]</sup> shells the town frequently, and people die for no fault of theirs.

The majority of the residents of the neighborhood we are in are from Aleppo, Al-Madiq and Al-Ghouta. There are only one or two Kurdish families living here. In general, children's language here is obscene and they have a "lack of religion", meaning sometimes I hear them say blasphemous words. A child grows up according to how his/her parents raise them. That is why we prevented our children from playing with the neighborhood children. Their games, prayers, and education are all at home. I prevented them from mixing with anyone. When a child grows up with immoral children, he/she will be damaged. That is why I went out of my way to protect my house, my children, and my grandchildren.

I live with my son and his children and my daughter is in high school. My daughter has greatly suffered because of our continuous displacement, so her studies were delayed. She was supposed to be in college now and about to graduate. She couldn't get her middle school diploma until last year. This year, she enrolled in a secondary institute, but she faces difficulties, as she cannot take the high school exam until two years have passed after completion of middle school.

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[25] Syrian Democratic Forces :It was established in 2015 and is dominated by a Kurdish character and the influence of the Democratic Union Party) PYD.(



## The particularity of the situation of Palestinians

For us Palestinians, there are no relief/aid institutions here. The Palestine Association<sup>[26]</sup> gives us a small bag containing some food once a year. We went to the local council and they told us: “You are Palestinian, you have your representative, they support your situation.” We go to our representative, and he says: “We support you” and yet we don’t receive anything. Since we came they have been surveying us to no avail. When we first arrived in the north, there were special committees for Palestinians who registered our names and sent them to UNRWA through the Red Crescent. UNRWA did not respond, and no one responded.

We are trying through young people here on behalf of the Palestinians, to submit requests to the United Nations and to any party. We are still within the country and we have proof of that. The medical white cards prove the presence of Palestinians in this area. We are trying through them to make claims for assistance.

There is no UNRWA here. They say that this is an armed area and that is why there is no representative for them and they do not assist people here. Since we got here, no Palestinian has taken any help from them. If they are taking aid on our names there, God knows. We can’t ask anyone in Damascus, they are afraid to talk to us because the regime arrested many people by monitoring phones.

Had UNRWA been present in the north, the situation of the Palestinians would have certainly been different. It provides people with healthcare and livelihoods. UNRWA education is completely different. A student returning from an UNRWA school would have all his lessons memorized, but now if the parents did not put in extra effort with their children, it is impossible for them to learn. UNRWA was taking care of some of the surgeries. A person would conduct an operation, and UNRWA would cover 90-95% of the expenses. They’ve done monthly heart and blood pressure check-ups, while here nobody cares.

We want the organizations to pay attention to the suffering Palestinians. My demand is that they provide us with a place to settle. And a place to live no more. I demand this for every Palestinian here, not just me. There are orphans, women and elderly people, and there are families below the poverty line who need help.

I feel like I’m a guest here who might leave at any moment. I always remember my home in Khan al-Sheikh and start to cry. It will remain a dent in the heart. I used to deprive my children of certain things just to build them a house to secure their future. My house was large, with three rooms, a living room, and utilities, and in front of it was a beautiful terrace. I tried

[26] The Palestine Relief and Development Association :a volunteer-based organization active among Palestinian refugees in Syria.

to create for them a paradise where they would live and not need anything from anyone.

I will not go back to Damascus as there is no one left for me there. No father, no husband, no brother. I have five brothers and they were all martyred. My loved ones are all dead. Who do I want to come back to? To the walls? What do I want with the walls? Who will bring back to me the ones who died? Who wants to bring back the smile that was in my heart? If I ever return, I will go back to sell the house there and build a house here. It's over. My heart can't stand it anymore. And there is no security. Many returned and they were arrested. It is impossible to trust the regime, no matter how many guarantees and promises they offers, because it is unjust and treacherous.

But my hope in God is that the return will be to Palestine... God willing, it will be to Palestine.

## They displaced us for sectarian reasons

**We went through a lot of pain and we don't want this for our children, I want another country to live in peace**

My name is Muhammad Falah (Abu Al-Majd). I am forty-three years old. I am from Palestine, Tiberias, Al-Majama Bridge. In the 1948 Nakba, my grandfather was displaced to the Golan Heights, which borders Palestine, and Tiberias, the closest to them. He settled there until Hafez al-Assad sold the Golan to Israel during the 1967 aggression, so they had to migrate again to the Damascus countryside and settled in the Sayeda Zeinab area.

### Al-Sayeda Zeinab

The area was popular with simple and cheap prices for buying houses and housing, adjacent to the capital. It included a mixed population from all Syrian governorates; Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, Aleppo and Idlib. In addition, it included camps for the Palestinians. There was no discrimination between us and we did not experience any discrimination between the Syrians and the Palestinians. They did not ask me about my nationality except in the security branches or government offices.

There is no doubt that each region has its own customs and traditions, but we did not differ in caring for each other. I had friends from different regions. The well-known gathering of Palestinians in the area was the Sayeda Zeinab camp, behind the Sayyida shrine, and it was exclusively for Palestinians. There was another small neighborhood that was not considered a camp called the Ghorba neighborhood, in which there were more than forty Palestinian families. There were also Palestinians on Fayeze Mansour Street. Other families resided in the neighborhoods of the area. In the early nineties, during the Gulf war, the region began to receive visitors to the shrine of Sayyida Zainab, and began to flourish commercially and economically, especially in the tourism sector. It featured restaurants, shops and large markets. And soon it became one of the booming tourist areas in the Damascus countryside. There were many job opportunities, so people came to work and trade.

I reached the ninth grade (3rd middle school) and did not complete my studies due to the difficult living conditions. My father had seven sons and five daughters, and everyone was studying, which constituted a great burden on him. After leaving school, I worked in one of the Sayeda Zainab markets. I started from almost nothing, a small booth that I used to sell from in a street near the shrine. After that, my project grew and I owned a kiosk, then a

shop in the market to become one of the wholesalers in the region in cosmetics and bridal accessories, taking advantage of the economic boom.

## The revolution began

I was staying in my house next to my family. The demonstrations began in Daraa. The following Friday there was a small demonstration. They arrested a number of protesters, but then came out a few days later. After another Friday, a larger demonstration took place, in which a young man named Muhammad al-Shadeed, from the Quneitra governorate, no more than 16 or 17 years old, was killed. He was shot in the head and I witnessed his killing. A young man named Yamen Al-Azizi was accused, arrested and appeared on television and confessed to killing Al-Shadid, as usual, with the regime's constant attempts to create tensions between clans, given that the two young men belonged to two different clans, knowing that the accused was later released from prison. I was one of the witnesses who saw the killer shooting directly at al-Shadid. His name was Abu Jaafar from the State Security Branch. I went to the house of the dead man, accompanied by another witness, and we swore by the Qur'an that the killer was not Yaman Al-Azizi, but rather Abu Jaafar. The father and mother were convinced that the regime had killed their son, but they needed someone to confirm this.

The demonstrations began to grow and intensify and spread to more than one neighborhood in Sayeda Zeinab, and I participated in them. The State Security arrested me in late 2011 and I was detained for seventy days, during which I was subjected to many types of beatings, humiliations, torture and all the criminal ways of torture of the regime. I was detained in Al-Khatib branch located on Baghdad Street for forty-five days, after which I was transferred to the Central Branch of State Security in Kafr Sousa to complete the seventy days. I was released after being brought before a pro forma court<sup>[27]</sup> that forced me to sign a paper pledging not to participate in the demonstrations, and another paper pledging to report anyone I knew who participated in them. The reason for my arrest was that there were those whom we call "Awaniya" or regime shabiha who mentioned my name in their written reports to the security about my participation in the demonstrations, specifically in one in which the statue of Hafez al-Assad was broken in my area, and they accused me of vandalizing it. A month or less after my release, I was arrested for the second time by the Military Security branch, this time, and I stayed with them for forty-five days. Then I was transferred from this branch, located in Kafr Sousa, opposite Cham Center, to the Palestine branch, and from there I was released.

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[27] The court does not usually ask for papers to be signed. This may have happened before the investigator in the Security Branch.

I was arrested because I did not stop demonstrating, nor did I stop demanding with the Syrians, whom I consider my family and my first homeland, to bring down this immoral regime. From the beginning, I saw that this regime had neither credibility nor humanity. In addition, the first arrest made me participate more in our demand for freedom. They raided my house at 5 o'clock in the morning. I was sleeping with my wife and children when they broke into our bedroom. We woke up to find them above our heads without the slightest respect for the privacy or sanctity of homes. They beat and insulted me in front of my wife and children and took me to prison. In the prison, there was no distinction between us as prisoners between a Syrian and a Palestinian. However, the shabiha were a different story, they were insulting me with racist slurs. On one occasion I was asked for interrogation and all the insults were because of my nationality: Are you Palestinian? You are a guest here. What are you doing here? Want to topple the regime? I was beaten and insulted. This was repeated more than once outside the investigation as well.

In the detention center there was an imam from Daraa al-Balad, whose name I do not remember, but I remember that he is from the Sayasneh family, he was between 50 and 55 years. He was tortured daily and at all times, morning and night. They prevented us from talking to him. He was crying because he was subjected to many insults and beatings. Another person who was subjected to a lot of beatings and insults was Asaad from Jabal Al-Zawiya. They would take him walking on his feet and bring him back only when he was unconscious from the severity of the torture. Another young man from Deir ez-Zor was tortured in front of us. They put him on the wall and continued to beat him until he lost consciousness. They woke him up with water and hit him on the back, but this time with scalpel blades, and left him without any kind of treatment until his wounds rotted. We were 85 detainees in a cell measuring four by five meters. We were all there on similar charges, participating in the Syrian revolution. From this prison, they transferred me to the Kafr Sousa branch, interrogated me again, and repeated the beatings and insults again, so that I would then be transferred to the court and be released.

I was arrested by the Military Security branch in the same way, I was beaten, insulted by the shabiha. Fifteen days before my departure, I was transferred to the Palestine Branch, where they brutally tortured me. They used to tell us: You are terrorists, saboteurs. I was insulted because I am Palestinian. One night, they called three names, and I was one of them. They made me sign papers with the same previous pledges, in addition to a paper, which was a prerequisite, that pledges loyalty to them in return for my release. They provided me with a phone number to call them in case I know of any participants in the demonstrations to report them. That was in 2012.

Some time after my second arrest, one of my acquaintances called me to tell me that there were intelligence agents in our street watching my house and asking about me. I asked one of my friends, who was working in one of the security branches, and he told me that I was wanted by them. I hid in the homes of my friends and acquaintances for quite some time.

## The massacre

On July 18, 2012, a demonstration took place in Ali al-Wahsh Street, and it was targeted and demonstrators were shot. A young man named Abdel Rahim al-Samour was killed. At 8 o'clock in the evening of the same day, people went to attend his funeral. Although I was wanted, I also attended the funeral, which was heading to the Hajira cemetery next to the Sbeinah roundabout. I arrived at the end of the funeral ceremony because I received a phone call which slowed me down a little bit. In a sudden moment I heard a strange sound and the smell of death filled the air. A feeling that is hard to forget. I lost consciousness a bit and didn't know what was going on around me. Took me a few minutes to regain consciousness again. I looked at the protesters and found most of their bodies lying on the ground. There were heads, hands and legs everywhere. Bodies scattered along the street. I was terrified, was it an explosion? Did a missile hit the mourners? I didn't know.

We were treating people, myself and some of the survivors. Of course, we were not able to take them to government hospitals, so we took them to mosques, where doctors and nurses helped out. It took about six hours to move the bodies. Then eyewitnesses who were on the roofs of their buildings began to arrive and gave us testimonies of what had happened; A helicopter bombed the funeral with two missiles, causing the explosion that killed more than 450 young men from our neighborhoods and beyond. On that day, a close friend of mine named Abdel Moneim Al-Numeiri was martyred. He was a wonderful friend. Among those who were treated by a person named Muhammad al-Mashtoli, whose two legs were cut off, he remained alive for about half an hour before he died. Another young man I carried was named Muhammad al-Quseyrini, his head was almost separated from his body, hanging as if by a thread.

Back then the protests were peaceful in the region. The next day, when we started burying the bodies, people came running into the streets, shouting that the Shiites would attack us and cut our heads off. So everyone who had a weapon — whether a knife or a stick — carried it. And we started blocking the streets in order to protect our families, our children and our women. On this day the change from peaceful to armed began. The regime seemed to be planning this in advance. I saw them with my own eyes, Afghans, Iranians and Iraqis carrying weapons. Hezbollah appeared immediately and openly in the region. Likewise,



another armed group named Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, whose leader was nicknamed Abu Ajeeb, was from Nubol and a resident of Sayyida Zainab. The amount of weapons they had was insane. They immediately killed every young man they arrested. From this day the armed events began.

Before these events, we felt the changes taking place in the region; Husseinias appeared in Sunni neighborhoods, as well as hotels for Shiite pilgrims, hospitals including Al-Sadr Hospital and Khomeini Hospital. They were appearing in the area even before the revolution. We were surprised to learn that during the revolution, those who were leading these Husseinias and supervising them were security personnel affiliated with a certain party. More than 700 members of a party in Iraq were present with their weapons in the Fatimid Husseiniya. The weapons appeared in these Husseinias and the killing began.

Events accelerated quickly and arrests were made not by the Assad regime, but by militias, and in our region in particular. The militias who carried out those arrests included Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, which appeared after a prior preparation, Hezbollah, and a group called the Fatemiyoun brigade affiliated with Iran, but whose members were Afghans.

### **Armed to protect ourselves**

After the emergence of these Shiite armed groups, we began to arm ourselves individually to protect ourselves in the absence of any supportive party. Whoever owned a hunting weapon, rifle or pistol carried it. No one possessed anything beyond these simple weapons. We organized ourselves as families, neighborhoods and friends. For example, my brothers and I began to share tasks, one of us watched the area, and when any stranger entered, and would tell us when any stranger entered the area, and we took turns carrying hunting rifles standing to protect our children from being killed.

Events began to accelerate and the attacks on us increased. We organized ourselves and showed up with our weapons in public, this was around late 2012. We started to station at certain points and they were stationed there at the same time.

The issue of ammunition was difficult, with the expectation of an attack on us at any moment. Therefore, we had to join a group called Ahfad al-Rasul, and they supplied us with ammunition. The group was present in Daraa and Idlib. We remained stationed in that area until its fall in 2013 because of some individuals, whom we discovered later, were agents of the regime, only to appear later under the name of Daesh.

2013 was the most difficult year I have lived. My father was in the Kiswa area and he was sick, so my mother had to take him to a hospital in Damascus. He was stopped by the Kiswa checkpoint, which was affiliated with Military Security, I think. They took him to one of the rooms next to the point and prevented my mother from accompanying him. He was absent for about an hour or less and then they handed him a dead body. He was seventy-two years old. My mother said they beat and insulted him, but no one knows what exactly happened. They did not shoot him, his body was bluish and had signs of torture. Perhaps his sick body could not bear the beating or the electrocution, so he was killed. The reason was that we, his children, engaged in the Syrian revolution. I think some people snitched on my father because there was more than one car at the checkpoint, yet they took only him, or perhaps our names were circulated at the checkpoints. He passed away on the 25th of October 2013, and this was very painful for us.

A few weeks later, a brutal military campaign took place in our area, so we had to fight to protect people and our homes. Our goal was only to protect civilians because the attackers were monsters. The last day of the battle, on the 14th of November, we were subjected to great pressures, and a certain party I mentioned let us down, so we had to withdraw. As we withdrew, me and two of my brothers and others were ambushed; we were eight people. Everyone was killed. I was the only one who survived, I took a bullet in the head and another in the abdomen, and I thank God for my survival. My two brothers were killed, and so was one of the soldiers called Abu Shahd, and another named Mahmoud from Al-Thiabiya, and one named Ali, and also a Palestinian young man named Abd. About a week later, my nephew was killed when a missile targeted a building he was in.

While we were leaving, I sat on the floor crying. The feeling was too difficult for a mind to comprehend. Not only did I leave my home, but my country, my memories, and everything else. My home in which I was born and raised is being desecrated before my eyes. The last time I looked at my house, how did all this happen? When will we come back? When will we liberate the area and get my house back? The situation was very difficult.

## Siege in Yarmouk camp

Because we are Palestinians, we took refuge in the Yarmouk camp. The camp is adjacent to the Yalda area adjacent to Sayeda Zeinab. It was at this exact time that the siege of the camp began, but it still did not reach the level of brutality until later. I stayed in the camp with my wife and four children, the wife of my martyred brother and his four children, and the wife of my second martyred brother and his six children. We stayed in the same building with my sister and her son. Her husband was arrested before these events, then the

news of his death came.

We lived through some of the toughest days. It would take two or three days until we could secure a meal of weeds, even if they were poisonous, we still ate them. Securing food was a very difficult issue. I cried many times, I would go in the morning to search for something to fill the tummies of my children who sat at the door of the house waiting for me to come with something to eat. I would come back with empty hands every day. This tragedy will not be erased from my memory as long as I live.

We were going to get an herb they called alfalfa that was found on the front lines. I had to go at night disguised in black so that the sniper wouldn't see me. I crawled a kilometer to fetch this herb to feed the children. On one occasion I found the body of a young man lying among the plants, probably he wanted to fetch the grass to eat as well. Many went and did not return. We ate a herb called diplotaxis (wall rocket), a poisonous herb that animals avoid. It was causing swelling in our hands and face, but it was the only way to survive. No other options. I also knew people who slaughtered and ate cats.

We used to walk two kilometers to reach an area called al-Qadam to fetch drinking water, or manage a little water from wells in very primitive ways. Medicine was scarce. Fuel wasn't available, and some even resorted to burning plastic, melting it, refining it, and making a substance similar to diesel from it. It is a very dangerous method, and some have been subjected to burns, disfigurement and even death during the process. We also had difficulty communicating and we avoided contact with anyone outside our circle so that they wouldn't be arrested. The siege of Yarmouk was one of the harshest and most severe sieges in human history. We watched children, women and old people die of starvation. The media rarely mentioned this, but we were eyewitnesses.

The biggest tragedy was the massacre of Ali al-Wahsh, which was not mentioned in the media or in any international human rights platform, except in a very limited manner. More than a 1,500 documented martyrs were killed, and according to my estimates, the number of martyrs exceeded 2,500. It happened on the 5th of January 2014. Prior to this, it was announced that a humanitarian crossing would be opened for civilians from the side of the Ali al-Wahsh neighborhood. The rumor spread widely in the region, and we couldn't find out the source. On that date, people flocked towards the crossing. I went to see what would happen. I was surprised that the person in charge of the crossing was a person named Abu Sayah Farama, whose real name is Abdullah Fares Tayara, a resident of Yalda. He was responsible for this checkpoint with his brother Abu Jaafar and several other masked elements. We didn't know who they were affiliated with, but they weren't associated with the Free Army. Some thought they were from Jabhat al-Nusra, and others said

they were an independent Islamist faction. Abu Sayyah Farama oversaw the massacre in agreement with the members of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Shiite faction. Thousands of people, women, men and children, came to the Ali al-Wahsh crossing around 8 morning. I tried to stop them. I told them that the situation seemed unsafe, and there was no security, but no one listen. Abu Sayyah made them believe that there was an agreement between him and the other party not to harm civilians. People were tired of hunger, so they went in huge numbers. Around 4 or 5 o'clock some people started returning individually. I asked some people about what happened. One of the women told me: "They killed the young men, they burned them". She was so terrified. She told me what happened in detail: "They raped the girls. They took them to a mosque called Fatima on Ali al-Wahsh Street and raped the women and assaulted the children. In the yard behind this mosque, young people and entire families were burned". Most of the 1,500 documented men were killed. But the number was probably greater than that and exceeded 2,000 or 2,500 people. There was no mention of the women who were raped in order to preserve the reputation of their families.

## The first emir of ISIS

After the massacre, Abu Sayyah Farama publicly appeared as the first ISIS emir in the region. He raised the black banners, recruited elements and began the assassinations. Food baskets from an area called Al-Khayala used to reach him in return for handing over some people. It began to grow and infiltrate the area from Yalda all the way to Hajar al-Aswad. His elements exceeded 3000 and began killing people. Some say that his nickname is "chopper" because he "chopped"<sup>[28]</sup> many people, but the truth is that he previously owned a machine for shredding plastic and scrap that he bought from people. He was detained by the regime in 2011. And in 2012 he appeared, after he was released, and began to establish his faction. ISIS entered Al-Hajar Al-Aswad and expanded there, then began attacking Yarmouk camp and killing young people and civilians. They booby-trapped houses and blew them up. I was detained there for fourteen days. Abu Jaafar, the brother of Abu Sayyah, took me with the help of his assistant, photographed me and made me think that he would execute me. His purpose was to obtain information from me about some people, their places of residence and hiding, and how to find them. I was released in a prisoner exchange deal for members of the Free Army and civilians like me, as I was a civilian at the time, they were detained by ISIS, in exchange for ISIS prisoners for members of the Free Army.

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[28] killed

ISIS arrested everyone who opposed them, everyone who refused to join them and whoever spoke out against their practices. They arrested or killed them directly. ISIS killed many young men, especially in the Yarmouk camp. There was insistence on their part to destroy the camp in any way possible, as if the matter was systematic and agreed upon in advance. From the beginning, I suspected that Abu Sayyah Farama was a direct agent of the regime. And I have evidence confirming that everything he did was under the auspices of Bashar al-Assad.

## Displacement from Babila

After the arrest and the exchange of prisoners, I could no longer stay in the camp and had to take refuge in Babila. It was besieged by ISIS, the regime, and Shiite militias that surrounded an area not exceeding three square kilometers that included Babila and Yalda and the small town of Beit Sahem. I stayed there from 2015 to 2018. At first, I lived as a civilian, but after a fought on the frontlines. Then, talk in the area began about settlements and displacement, and elements began to promote a settlement until May 2018, when the Russian forces, which were forces separating us and the regime, entered and provided buses to take us north.

Displacement was the right decision for me and others like me. The choice to stay in Assad's areas was either absolutely stupid or that I was an agent of the regime. I could not bear, after all I had seen and lived through in terms of murder and crime, to stay and agree to a settlement with the regime. I chose the right direction. The moment I left was very difficult. I felt so much pain as if I had lost something in my heart. When I first left my home, I moved to a nearby area about a kilometer away. I could go up on the roof of any building and see my house. But this displacement was way more difficult.

I left with my family, brothers, wives and children. My wife was pregnant in the ninth month. It was an arduous journey during which we were subjected to insults from the security forces, and we were stoned from the shabiha in the villages along the road. Until we reached the al-Bab area, where the Abu al-Zandin crossing was. We were held at the crossing until the approval of the Turkish side for us to enter the liberated areas. At this time, my wife gave birth, and the Red Crescent helped her. We left the convoy and headed to Al-Bab Hospital. My wife gave birth to twins, and one of them needed oxygen and care, which was not available in this hospital, so we had to move to Azaz Hospital, which is my current place of residence.

## Difficulties from day one

After I took my child to the hospital, I slept in the street in front of the hospital for a whole day, even though it was cold and raining. I didn't know anyone in the area and nowhere to go. On the second day, they asked me to take my wife and children out of the hospital, so I had to take them out. We sat on the street for about six hours and I started looking for accommodation. I asked shopkeepers, passersby, and motorists for a house to rent. When I told them that I was displaced from Damascus, it was as if I were saying that I came from Saudi Arabia or Europe. They asked for very high prices, 100-150USD for houses not worth ten dollars. I had to rent a house for a hundred dollars, I barely had a month's rent. I had a gun, so I sold it and paid another month's rent. During the two months we spent what was left, so I had to take refuge in the camp, and we have been living there to date. The camp itself is an endless pit of suffering, a winter of cold, mud and disease, and a summer of heat and poisonous insects that may cause death.

Currently, I'm unemployed due to Covid and the lack of job opportunities in the region. There is no stability that allows the establishment of any project. I voluntarily worked with a relief agency for seven or eight months, and with a second party documenting widows and orphans for eight months. It was voluntary work.

We are finding it very difficult to adapt so far. After four years we are not familiar with the environment. The reason may be the difference in customs, traditions and temperaments in general. People here are completely different from our region, they are materialistic. In our regions we used to serve each other in a friendly manner, here if you want to ask someone about a place, the first thing he thinks about is how to use you to profit from you. This difference between us and them is the main reason why we don't get along with them.

I was arrested in 2020 for 25 days by a local security agency, the Military Police. They interrogated me about previous activities, and I did not know the reason for my arrest even after they released me.

I was surprised that people here have no idea about the Palestinian presence in Syria. Some asked me: Are you an immigrant from Palestine? I said that I am not an immigrant, my grandfather has lived in Syria since 1948, I was born here, my mother is Syrian and my wife is also. We have often been in situations like this. Even our identification papers in the government centers of the liberated areas are problematic. For example, it takes a few minutes to get a Syrian identity card, while I struggled for four months until I got it. These areas are completely oblivious to the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian presence in Syria.



As a Palestinian, I ask UNRWA to pay attention to us. All the institutions that are supposed to be responsible for the Palestinians in northern Syria completely abandoned us four or five years ago, ever since we were displaced.

Our goal, like that of any emigrant, is a home and a safe haven, or a safe country for us and our families. Securing employment opportunities is a top priority at the same time. Our goal is not just to obtain financial assistance, a food basket or cartons. We have new undocumented marriages and births. These people do not have any UNRWA documenting their presence in northern Syria. Today, we call on all Palestinian parties, stakeholders, and institutions that support the Palestinian cause to help us — the Palestinians in northern Syria — who are stripped from all our basic human rights. What we are looking for today is safety for our children so that they do not live what we have experienced. We've been through a lot of pain and we don't want this for our children. I want to go to another place or country for me and my children to live in peace.

I have great hope to return to Damascus. I hope that it will soon be fulfilled, God willing, because it is related to one person, the criminal Bashar al-Assad, and he will not remain there forever. If I do not return, my children will return to the place of their father's birth and upbringing, with the fulfillment of our condition that the regime is toppled with all its components and military institutions. This was our demand and it will always be until we return.

I also have hope for a day of return to Palestine. It's the word among us Palestinian families from grandfather to father to son — even today. We used to hear from my grandfather: "My son, we'll go back and see, we'll go back, we'll do this and that." My father told us the same thing and in the same way: "We'll go back to our country and we'll live and work and build." Our generation will tell our children who will in turn tell their children. Our cause is not an issue of a house or a street, it is an issue of a homeland that will remain firmly rooted in our memory until death, and will remain generation after generation.

A lasting hope in our hearts, we will return.

## At least we brought our clothes

Even if we've lived here for long, we would still be considered strangers

My name is Nidal Ghazal. I am from Palestine, Haifa, the village of Ain Ghazal. In Syria, we used to live in the city of Tel Rifaat in the countryside of Aleppo, before we were displaced to a camp near the village of Sejjo, near the Bab al-Salama border crossing with Turkey. I'm 54 years old. I studied until the sixth grade of primary school. I was working in knitwear when we were in Tal Rifaat.

### Palestinian memory

I heard from my family about our village in Palestine that it is an agricultural town; It has orchards, vineyards and orange groves. They were growing wheat and barley. In the spring they would pick hibiscus, akub, and wild chard for cooking. Our village is located on a mountainside overlooking the sea; and so there was a lot of fishing. In our village there is a spring of water that deer come to drink from; That is why they called it Ain Ghazal. It also has the shrine of Sheikh Shehadeh.

When my father was in Palestine, he worked for his livelihood. His family had cows and it was a resource for them. Then he worked as a coal miner with the British and lived with them. At first it never occurred to him that the English were planning something and harboring sinister intentions for them. They were watching the Jews training and getting ahead of them, and when they asked what they were doing they said they were playing sports. Then the Jews attacked them with their weapons, wanting to displace them from their villages and their homes. And the American planes bombed them. American planes dropped missiles that demolished the lane<sup>[29]</sup>. People cooperated so they sold their women's gold and bought a small cannon called "barnagal", and whoever was able bought a rifle. They kept resisting until they left the village. They thought at the time that they would return as soon as the soldiers finished searching the village. But what happened was completely different. After they were evicted from their homes, they told them that they intended to displace them. People gathered in some areas at first and then dispersed; Some of them came to Syria, some went to Iraq, and so on, each group is in a country. My father came to Syria. After his arrival, he settled in Tel Rifaat. Not only him, but many families. After camps were set up, most Palestinians went to live there. Dad did not agree

[29] The American airstrikes had nothing to do with the battle.

to leave. We and three Palestinian families stayed until the last wave of migration from Tel Rifaat, where we had lived there for 73 years.

### **In Tal Rifaat in the countryside of Aleppo**

At first, the people of the area welcomed us into their homes and offered us rooms and we lived with them. Then, when it became clear that the crisis would be prolonged after Palestine was handed over to the Jews, we lost hope. Those who were able to rent a house and take jobs to support themselves and their families did so. My father, may God have mercy on him, worked for someone, and my father had dues, so he gave him the land on which he built our house. Every year he built a little according to his ability, until it became a house like people's houses. And we lived there until we left the area.

My father was married before my mother. My brothers from my father did not live with us. They could not stand the idea of having a stepmother in the house. Their older brother was married and he took them to live with him. As for us, we were six boys and two girls. One of us studied Arabic literature at the university. The older brother couldn't complete his studies even though he was smart. He neglected his studies and started working in my father's profession, in construction.

My younger brother also became a welder like my father. Most of my siblings worked with him in the summer due to lack of money, thus saving my dad the workers' wages. My brothers grew up and they joined the military service. The three older brothers joined around the same time. They needed an allowance and we lived in financial hardship. At this time, I was in the 6th grade and couldn't complete my studies because my father was unable to buy the necessities of books, notebooks and my school uniform. I left school even though I studied for a month in 7th grade after they opened middle school that year. My mother said she would take me to a knitting master, and I actually went to her until I learned the trade. We had nothing. We had no agricultural land and no one works. My older brothers were in the army and some of them wanted to get married and so on. My mother sold a piece of gold that she had and we bought the machine. My mother was very tired. At first I worked in farming, and then she started helping me with knitting, wrapping the wool and waxing it, then we knitted it. Woolen work passes through three stages. My mother became very tired by helping me. We used to help my brothers in the military with their expenses whenever we could.

When my father built the house, he owned nothing. He initially built two rooms and cast the roof. We lived in them for a long time; One of them had a bathroom and a kitchen in which we used to bake on the stove. We lived in one room and used it for three purposes until we were able to build utilities, and have a bathroom and kitchen about ten years before we left the house.

Our neighborhood houses are lined up, wall to wall. Even the roofs of the houses are attached to each other. We could go from one street to the other on the rooftops. They were situated near arable land. Then there was a carpet factory near us that the girls worked in. I didn't go there but a lot of girls worked there. Then a bakery was later established in the neighborhood. Tal Rifaat developed significantly and provided everything in our neighborhood.

Life in Tal Rifaat was simple and quiet. When my brothers were in school, my father would wake up at 7am, light up our diesel heater. He drank tea and smoked a lot of cigarettes. We would wake up after him and prepare breakfast and tea. The boys went to school and came back at noon. By that time my mom would have prepared lunch. She cooked Palestinian food; Shish barak, sambousek, manakish. In the spring we ate mallow, which we loved so much. Molokhia was also one of our favorite foods, and we introduced it to Tal Rifaat and introduced it to the people of the city. One of the men of the three Palestinian families who settled in Tel Rifaat was a gardener, so he rented a piece of land and cultivated crops there. We used to go to get the molokhia that we planted and dried it and kept it for winter. We asked the people of Tal Rifaat about it, they thought it was mint. I told them it was molokhia. They didn't know what it was, but after they tried it, they ate it more than we did. We used to store thirty or forty kilos for winter, but they kept more than 200 kilos. Truth be told, molokhia is a very tasty dish.

The people of Tel Rifaat depended on agriculture. They grew wheat, barley, lentils and legumes, and they also planted olives. When they harvested the wheat before its grains became ripe, they made freekeh from it, which became a basic staple for them. They stored large quantities of it to cook on occasions and invited people over. The number of guests reached 400-500, and even more sometimes.

This was the life of everyone in our region, not just us. In the summer we would help the locals harvest their land. And in the winter I worked on a knitting machine. My sister got tired of working in the wilderness collecting potatoes, onions, etc. We didn't own land, and that is why we worked with the locals.

The only consistent source was the food the agency gave us, and we called it relief. Relief continued to be distributed to us until our eighties, and it came in sufficient quantities. With the beginning of the Lebanon War, it was cut off for a while, and they were no longer given to us except for very specific cases, such as to families who had no breadwinners. We went too long without assistance since my brothers were all grown young men. But after their marriage and independence from home, we were given assistance again. My mother, my sister and I became exceptional cases. The assistance that was given to us contained flour, rice, sugar, ghee, beans, lentils, some clothes sometimes, kerosene oil, and many other things.

## Slogans on walls

At the beginning of the uprising, some people started writing slogans on the walls of Tel Rifaat to “topple the regime”. People spray painted the slogans and others came to erase the slogans — both supporters and opponents of the regime. Then everyone went out in demonstrations. Supporters demonstrated and opponents demonstrated. On one occasion, I was standing in the alley, on the day of the Parliament elections<sup>[30]</sup>, when I was surprised by regime opponents who attacked a polling station and took the ballot boxes. In their attack, they swept us in their wave of attacks, and to this day, I don’t know how I managed to run out of there.

At the beginning of the demonstrations, the security forces would come to disperse us, and they would hit us with black stones that they brought from the side of the railway tracks. Clashes and beatings occurred. The two sides both attacked each other. Things have developed and they were carrying weapons. I did not see anything because the battles were on the outskirts of the town and did not take place inside it. Opponents besieged Minnigh Airport; in order to relieve the pressure on them, the regime finally bombed the town, mostly airstrikes. Planes were bombing everywhere opposition headquarters were. Most of their headquarters were among homes and in the neighborhoods. There was air bombardment around us and several houses were destroyed, but our house was not damaged at all, even though a lot of damage occurred during that period. Sometimes the army came to inspect the town. Some streets they never searched and did not even pass by. Houses remained untouched while others were horribly vandalized, furniture and electrical appliances were broken, and homes were set ablaze. Some said that the army burned the houses, and others said that those who set fire to the houses were pro-regime haters — no one knew what had happened. The houses of two of my brothers were burned among

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[30] On 07 May2012

the houses that were burned, but no one knows the truth. One time the planes bombed us, the plane hit near my brother's house. He was standing at the door of his house with his little daughter. He was hit by shrapnel that entered his shoulder and exited from the other side, and the neighbors found him wounded and unconscious, and his three-year-old daughter had many wounds in her chest.

Some young men from the Free Army helped them to the nearest medical point, they were very helpful. But we weren't satisfied when we saw him bleeding, and we told him to leave the country, so he traveled to Turkey. My niece and her husband and brothers-in-law were killed in the air strikes. Their home and all their neighborhoods were destroyed. She had a little baby a few months old who was sleeping in his crib. From the severity of the blow, the closet fell on him while he was in bed. He survived even though his head was hurt. They also sent him to Turkey for treatment. He was left about a month alone as an infant.

When we heard there would be a big attack, we left and went to stay with my brothers for two days. On time we stayed for more than twelve days with my brother. He had left Tal Rifaat, rented a flat in Handarat camp, and settled there. After that, my mother, my sister and I returned to our house and we did not leave it despite the fighting. The planes were bombing us, ISIS was bombing us too. A lot of damage was done by ISIS who stayed in our village for some time and the Free Army fought them. A big battle took place and the Free Army expelled them. However, ISIS had caught some young men from the Free Army and imprisoned them in a large mill. After the departure of ISIS, the Free Army went to the mill and found them all dead. I didn't see firsthand but heard that they were about twenty young men who were beheaded and buried.

After our return from Handarat we lived in constant anxiety. We were afraid when the plane came to bomb. After it was gone, things were back to normal, as if nothing had happened. Doctors, restaurants, and everyone returned to their work and life. I wasn't afraid of planes but was terrified when they started throwing barrels. We were hurt a lot that day. A terrible fear we experienced. Warplanes were better than barrel bombs. Barrels are terrifying. When a barrel bomb falls on a lane, it destroys all of it. The "barrel bombing stage" began not long before we left. Almost less than a year.



## To the tents!

Then they started telling us to leave the area because the army would enter it and no one should stay there, so we left again. We first went to Al Haramain camp. The name of the area is Barisha, but they called it Al-Haramain because it was supported by Saudi Arabia, so I heard...

We stayed there three days without a tent. We were in the winter, and it was the coldest days of February. It was very cold, and there was sleet and rain. We froze and yet they didn't give us a single tent. It was so crowded and people were on top of each other. Everyone was displaced, not just the people of Tel Rifaat, but also the villages around it. We needed a tent and couldn't find it. My mother just had an operation on her leg, and she could not walk and was moving in a chair.

One of the men took care of us, and he lived in a cooperative compound, so he took us to his house, which consisted of one room and its facilities. We stayed with him for two days, mother, my sister, my niece and I. The room was small, almost half the size of a tent. The man, may God reward him, hosted us, but how long will he tolerate us? He was a stranger after all, and I could no longer stay. I got so nervous. Then they gave us a tent and we moved to it. The water was leaking under us so we couldn't sleep or sit. Drinking water was contaminated and the children vomited and had diarrhea.

My brother's wife said: "Let's go back, I'm not staying here." We found a car and got into it. We and my brothers' two wives went back, one of my brothers' wives lived with us and the other one lived by herself. The one who lived with us went to stay with her sister, and we continued to Tal Rifaat. My brother's second wife went to her house and we to ours. We spent the whole day at home, but did not sleep a single night in it. We cleaned, ate, stayed up until midnight and ran electricity on generators. I was watching TV, and I found them writing that the army reached Kaftin, which is six kilometers from Tal Rifaat. I told my brother Khaled: "The army is coming to Tal Rifaat." He said: "You can no longer stay alone, the army is coming, and you are a civilian, and with the army and air strikes it is no longer safe for you." Our neighbor came and said: "Leave now, everyone's gone". We wanted to leave but couldn't find a car to take us. Our neighbor owned a Kia agricultural car. We asked him to take us with him and he agreed, but without any furniture, his car was full of their things. Indeed, we rode with him and he took us to the house of my brother's wife's sister, who lived in a village called Kafr Kalbin. We were more than thirty-five or forty people in a house of two rooms, a small hall and utilities. Children outnumbered the adults. We stayed there for about fifteen days. It was too much to bear. My mother was helpless and needed a portable toilet. I was feeling embarrassed all the time. It was an extremely difficult situation.

One day, while we were cooking dinner, news came that the Kurds<sup>[31]</sup> had entered Tal Rifaat. We were shocked by what we heard. We expected that the regime's army would take Tal Rifaat, and none of us ever thought that the Kurds would enter it or attack it. How they got there, we didn't know! I thought, where should we go next? Will we stay with this woman (our host)? How long will we stay? The Tel Rifaat issue is almost over and resolved. We cannot remain guests in people's homes. Shall we go back to Haramain? But there were no tents there and it was very cold and frosty. Where will we live? We heard that the Kurds reached Ain Digna, near Kafr Kalbin. The young men came with cars and said: "Leave. You shouldn't stay here." They brought many cars and took us to Bab al-Salama camp. We were thirty-five women and four or five men. They gave us accommodation with a newly wedded bride in a tent half the size of the tent we stayed in. We couldn't sleep or stretch. And the bride was upset, how could she not be when she had to bear the presence of all these strangers?

I said to my niece, who was studying at an institute in Tel Rifaat: "Go see your uncle, let him find a solution. We cannot stay here." She came back shortly to say that they brought us a tent and they are installing it, and God willing, we will go to it. It's still our current tent, but at the time it was in Bab al-Salama camp. Indeed, after they finished installing the tent, everyone who was with us moved into it. More than thirty-five people slept in the tent literally on top of each other. We stayed about a week like this. Then the group that was with us said that the problems in their village were over, so they went back to their homes. So it was only us and my brother's family who stashed in the tent. My brother's wife's family were in this camp, so she wanted us to move there to remain among her family and her community. The place was good and not crowded, which is why we came to it.

## Camp diaries

At first the camp was in that nearby lower territory. Then they asked us to leave because the owner of the land wanted to build on it, so we left. We live here now and await relief from Allah. They said that they rented this land for five years, but the owner also wanted it. We have a deadline until the third month and then they will evict us, and I don't know where we will be going next.

At the beginning of our move from Bab al-Salama to here, we set up the tent and settled in it. We bought pre-made toilets for everyone. They dug a hole instead of sewage, and it was so exposed, in addition to the rain and mud. We suffered a lot in the first year.

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[31] What is meant here by "Kurds" is the "Syrian Democratic Forces", "whose central force is the Kurdish "People's Protection Units."

Water was running under us. We were waiting for the sun to come out to dry our things and put them back in the tent. We experienced this every winter. At the beginning of our displacement we thought it was a temporary issue. We thought that this situation would last for several days and so it was something we could bear. Personally, I did not want to spend a pound here; I didn't want to buy cement or anything else to improve the situation. I thought to myself that we'll go back home and I'll pay for things for my house. I didn't want to spend on something temporary. I didn't do any repairs or improvements. They were setting up the tent, piling dirt around it, and pulling the ropes. We would stretch the insulating nylon over the dirt and put mats on top of it. After a while, they gave us black insulators, which really insulated the water, but when the water flowed under us, it became damp and musty in the winter. The tent gets very hot in the summer, as if it were a hellfire. I couldn't stand it, I wished to die, I wanted to die. When my sister arrived at the tent, she would start shouting: "I came to the grave." The tent was located in a pit. And the street next to us, with the dust, and filth, wasn't habitable at all.

Then we expanded the tent a little, annexed a small piece of land that we used for cooking, washing and bathing. We relaxed a bit. After a while, the owner of the land said that he wanted the land to build on, so we were suffering again. We went up again near the mosque. Then I bought another used tent for about a hundred dollars according to the prices at the time, and we used it for a kitchen and for kitchen purposes. We carved out a small piece of land from which we made a bathroom and even added tiles to it, as we had to. It was better than having a bathroom inside the house. We improved some facilities year after year. After a while, an organization brought us insulators and put them on top of the tent to cool off the heat. The heat subsided and the cold became bearable. We also put insulators on the floor. I did not add tiles to all my tent, but most of the residents did and they even installed regular doors. Now we are comfortable, thank God, since the mud has softened and the cold is tolerable. Nevertheless, it is not like a real house with a roof and doors.

My mother was very tired and sick and we became exhausted as well. She was sitting on a chair. We could not take her out when it rained and the ground became mud, so she would stay in the tent for a long time, perhaps a month or two, and she would get very upset. When we were living in the pit, I couldn't take her out all winter, she got so nervous and begged us to take her out. She was always screaming and quarreling with us and did not sleep at night. We had a hard time with her. She was getting sick too. At some point, she had low blood sugar and we took her to the hospital. We called for an ambulance, but they didn't send it because they had no authority in the camp. I called a doctor I know and he sent us an ambulance and we took her to the hospital. This doctor filed a report that

they refused to send the ambulance to a seriously ill patient who could have died. On that day, the hospital staff were very upset and knew that we were the cause of the complaint. She was so sick and so low in sugar that I thought she was going to die. Finally they gave her the treatment and she got better and rested. She suffered a lot and had many problems. She was 86 years old and suffered from Alzheimer's. We were very tired. Most of her suffering was that she wanted her home and her children. Sometimes she would get off the chair and run fast, wanting to go back to her house, and I would bring her back with difficulty. And in the last period of her life, we had to force her to wear diapers. Some they supplied us with from an organization, and some we bought or got from people we know.

There was only one grocery store in the camp. Sejo, the nearest town, is far from us. It is difficult to get there on foot, especially in winter. Now that the roads have improved, things are a little easier. Before that, access to the market was very difficult because of the mud and the distance. We didn't have refrigerators. In this case, we would send someone with a motorbike or car to bring our needs. Meat, for example, is only available in the market in Sejo. If we wanted it, or a guest came to us, or for any urgent matter, we needed someone to bring it, and all our other needs as well. If we needed medicine or a doctor, we used any means of transportation available. It was very difficult to walk.

I have not dealt with the locals of this area or come into contact with them. The residents of the camp are all from my hometown, and I know everyone and my relationship with them is good, and they are good people. That is why I do not want to change the area or the community, as I am content here. At first, the people of Tel Rifaat got along with the people of Sejo, but then things got worse. People clashed and then armed groups began forming. Clashes occurred and bullets were flying everywhere, killing people on both sides. That's why they hold grudges and tensions till today. But in the camp, since everyone knows each other and are related to one another, problems are few. There are no tensions and no one is fighting anyone.

We rely on ourselves for money. Humanitarian assistance is received every five or six months, then stops for another six months. We are now in December, and we haven't received any since July, and most likely we will not be given anything before the New Year, meaning five months without assistance. This is how all organizations work. When their contracts expire, they stop and conduct a new survey that takes several months to be able to distribute assistance again. There is one organization that is responsible for the distribution of water and bread, and it is a blessing from God that water and bread are still provided until now. They also manage hygiene and sanitation. The garbage truck comes every day, sometimes twice a day. The rest of the services are good. We have electricity

and lighting, thank God. One of the locals in Tel Rifaat invested in electricity and helped deliver it to the people. But their prices are very high, and that is why we ration consumption. Also, the prices of fuel, such as petrol, diesel and gas, are very high.

### **Palestinians but...**

I am currently a beneficiary registered with UNRWA because I have a relative who lives in the regime areas with a power of attorney from us to help us with our affairs, since I was not able to get there due to the closure of roads. However, the amount of money they send is not enough. The last amount they sent me and my sister was a hundred dollars. This amount is not enough for us both, and cannot sustain us for a month when we are two people, so what if we were a large family of seven or more people? Every few months, maybe up to five, they send us an amount of money. So far, no one has come to tell us that we are affiliated with the PLO, the authority, or anyone else. Here in the camp, there is a person who belongs to an organization that I do not know. Sometimes he brings us very simple things that help us barely get by. A bowl of rice with meat is not enough for one person. Even when my mother was alive we got nothing from them. Although she was a widow and helpless and they were helping the widows, no one came and said: "Let's help this widow". Where was the right of the widow? My sister and I are also among the widows, as we have no breadwinner and no income. Why don't they count us? For more than a year, we have not received a food basket. Even when they brought clothes, it was always children's.

They built a village here, which they called the Seeds of Palestine, but no Palestinian benefited from an apartment or a plot of land. We have all been living in tents for six years and no one has come to give us a new tent. Currently, new tents are coming, but they are distributing them to each other and applying favoritism. There are those who took more than one tent and there are those who have been in the same tent for years. We have been in this tent for more than five years, no one asked us about its condition or what we needed. Our kitchen tent is a worn-out piece of cloth, and if an organization had not set it up for us, we would not have been able to afford one. Nobody cared about us or asked about us. We bought our tents — no one gave them to us, no NGO or Hamas nor any organization other than Hamas. Even the village of Seeds of Palestine was inhabited by mostly non-Palestinians, and when we objected, we were forced to stay silent by the authorities there. I did nothing but asked one question: "We are not receiving any assistance, why are you showing us that there is assistance, yet we get nothing and we watch all this with so much sadness?"

The most important thing at the moment is securing housing, because we were threatened to be evicted in March. My brother and I and five Palestinian families, as well as some Syrians from Tel Rifaat. But there are those who can manage their affairs. Some of them are in good financial condition, so they bought and built a house. But we still don't know where we'll go after the camp is handed over. Most of the people of Tel Rifaat are already forgotten, regardless of whether I am Palestinian or not. Nobody cared about us. We have been under threat for more than two years. Every year they tell us it's the last. This year, when we sent the rent to the owner of the land, he refused to receive it. The matter was settled, and there was no longer any doubt that we would leave. We don't know where we're going next. We do not have enough to buy land and build on it. It has become very expensive.

My brother was strong and in excellent health. But because of our poor living situation, he suffered from high blood pressure, a cerebral hemorrhage and a stroke. He earned 500 Turkish Lira, which was not enough for five days for him and his family. How do they sustain themselves for the rest of the month? Where will they eat? Good samaritans will help him for a month, two months, but what about after that? He has no young children. He has a fifteen-year-old boy who is still studying and the rest are girls. My brother needs a place to live as well, he will leave with us and will also need housing and shelter.

Palestinians were subjected to harassment. Those of them who did not take part in the revolution were considered shabiha (pro-regime), and were treated badly. They told us that we are shabiha, since we didn't take part in the demonstrations, didn't support the revolution, and didn't arm ourselves. My brother's three young sons were imprisoned. The Free Army took them to investigate and brought them back. They followed my other brother's children as well. They treated us with discrimination and racism because we didn't interfere. We had no interest in interfering, we were guests. Even if we lived here a long time ago, we would still be considered outsiders. The government considers us refugees and gives us a temporary identity and a passport called a travel document, not a real passport. As Palestinians, we are more subjected to persecution. Before the Syrian crisis, I often prayed to God to return to Palestine, and if I could smell its air, I would kiss its soil. But now, that we've seen what we saw, we've honestly forgotten about it. What we lived through during the crisis, from its beginning until today, and our stay here, affected us greatly. Our dreams died. We had hoped that a day would come when they would say that Palestine was liberated and we would return, but now I have no hope of our return even to Tel Rifaat. Confidence in the will of Allah has always existed, but at the moment I do not think that there is hope, not even one percent. I do not expect the Kurds to leave Tal Rifaat as long as the problem of Afrin remains. As long as Afrin was handed over to the Free Army and Tal Rifaat to the Kurds, things will remain the same. This is a thoughtful scheme. They



took over our areas and threw us in the northern areas, this is my opinion.

The Kurds do not allow us to enter our town. Whoever wants to go to inspect their house must first go to their police station in order to obtain an approval allowing them to enter. My brother's wife went to check her house and found that they had broken windows and doors and burned them to warm up. My second brother lives in Tal Rifaat, but he is unable to return to his home in the eastern region after they gathered all the residents in one area, the western one, with the excuse of providing services such as water, electricity and humanitarian assistance — that is, if they ever come.

If I had known that was what was going to happen and that this was the plan, I would have planned things better. I have two washing machines, fridges and a new kibbeh machine. But we did not expect the problem to be prolonged, nor this displacement. We thought it was a matter of a few days and then we would come back. So we didn't take any of our belongings with us — noone did. Whoever owned a car takes some things that fit in the car. Those who rented a car took their clothes and some cash. When we left, we rented a service car and took some mattresses, blankets and water in case we had to sleep outside. At least we could have gotten our clothes, which we didn't.

## We did everything we could

**Even my relatives said: If she wants to come and bring her children with her, no problem, but not her husband**

My name is Muhannad Al Nader. I'm 55 years old. I was a veterinarian in Syria, and now I work in Sweden as an assistant veterinarian. I am of Palestinian origin from the village of Hittin, Tiberias district. I was born in Damascus in the Jobar area and lived there for ten years, then we moved to Masaken Barzeh. I studied at university and lived for ten years in the city of Hama in central Syria, after which I returned to continue living in Damascus.

I'm Maha Khaddour. I'm 53 years old from the al-Mukharram al-Fawqani area, east of Homs. I studied English literature at the university in Homs and then moved to Damascus after our marriage. I lived there until we fled to Sweden.

## Childhood memories

I was born in 1968 in Mukharam, a small village about 40 or 50kms east of the city of Homs, close to the desert. Very large areas are cultivated with wheat near the village, and later they became olive and almond orchards. Our house was a small country house with a very large space for playing and picking flowers.

One of the beautiful memories I have was when we used to prepare "Bulgur Salika" once a year. After the harvest season, they would gather wheat and store bulgur for the whole year. Those days were like wedding days. Everyone cooks salika at the same time, i.e. the western lane and the eastern lane, using the same large pot that can contain about half a ton of wheat. When the wheat is boiled, men, women and children gather. I was one of those children. We used to play and wait for the salika to ripen, so they would give us a plate of it, put a little sugar on it, and we would eat it. I also remember when they used to prepare the keshkeh. Girls and women gather for this purpose. It was forbidden to bring children to maintain hygiene. The women gathered on the roof of one of the buildings and sang songs while we were at home listening. Childhood memories are very, very sweet.

Our village is Hittin, northwest of Tiberias, technically in the Ghor region. What distinguishes it - according to older women from the area - is that it did not snow there, only rained, which stimulated agriculture, mushrooms, and rain-fed plants. There are several springs in the village. In the recent pictures coming from Palestine, the Qastal spring is still present today. Hittin is famous for its agriculture. It has many olive trees, lemon trees, cacti and pomegranate trees, in addition to wheat, as well as vegetables. The village is not large. Its population in 1948 was nearly 800 people. There was an elementary school there. Students who had finished elementary school would move either to Tiberias or to Safad to complete middle school and higher education. The village was completely abandoned in the year of the Nakba. Until now, it is forbidden for any of its original residents to return to it. Most of its population left to Bint Jbeil in Lebanon, but some families were displaced to other Palestinian villages in Galilee, and now they are in the area of Sakhnin and Umm al-Fahm.

In Hittin there is the shrine of the Prophet Shuaib. The village still exists and has not been completely destroyed. The remains of the mosque there are still there. The shrine is present, and the remains of houses still exist. However, it is forbidden for any of its residents to return to it, even if they are from 1948.

When the people of the village were expelled, my father's family went in one direction and my mother's family in another. My mother's family went to Bint Jbeil and from there to Baalbek. In Baalbek, they boarded the train and left for Aleppo. After Aleppo, they moved to Barzeh camp and settled there.

At the beginning of the arrival of the Palestinian immigrants to the Barzeh region, the state distributed tents and aid to them. They used to use asphalt to protect the tent from the rain, and add dirt around the tent to protect from flooding. Then each person fenced the piece of land in the area in which they lived. And the tent turned from cloth to wood to other materials. To this day, Barzeh camp is still very camp-like and underdeveloped; its alleys are still extremely narrow and houses are adjoined. There are no wide streets.

When this community was formed in 1948, most of its residents were from the village of Hittin, from various families; Al-Daqqqa, Abu Sweid, Shaaban, Qaddoura, Al-Saadi, Muhanna, Rabah. Those are the most prominent families from Hittin. Of these families, there were some who lived in Aleppo in Syria and Ain El-Hilweh in Lebanon. When they left Hittin, they went to an area called Al-Zawiya, in the Golan Heights. From there they were displaced again; Some of them went to Khan al-Sheikh camp, and part went to Jobar, and part to Sayyida Zainab, and they also resided in the camps that were formed in those areas. When my father married my mother, he lived in Jobar. I was raised for ten years

in Jobar, then we moved to Masaken Barzeh. But most of my activities were in Yarmouk camp; my social life, relationships, people and acquaintances were all in Yarmouk. My acquaintances in Yarmouk were more than in Barzeh.

I remember Jobar well. In those days it was an agricultural area. We used to live in a one-room house. The whole family lived in it, six boys, one girl, a father and a mother. Nine people in one room. These are the ones who survived because there were children who lived for a year or two and died. The room was large, built of mud, with a wooden ceiling. It had a large yard with chickens, an oven for baking, and a kitchen next to it, and the toilet on the other side. There was a fig tree and a mulberry tree, and a well in the ground. We used to grow vegetables in the yard, onions, mint, coriander and more. We raised chickens and rabbits. The area around the house was all orchards. Most of them were nut orchards. The area was very very beautiful. We had a wonderful childhood. And the Palestinian presence there was great. But later people started moving to Yarmouk and other camps or to different areas of Damascus.

I will never forget how during the October 1973 war, both old and young people, looked for an Israeli pilot that fell in Ghouta. Unforgettable moments. There was a playground in front of our house and we always played football in it. There is something that farmers in the countryside of Damascus call "Al-Ba'aura". After the farmers have finished picking the walnuts; it became permissible for us, since we were not the owners of the land, to search for the remains of the walnuts. Another one of the nice activities we used to do as kids.

### Marriage is always in an open house

We used to study in the same university called Al-Baath University, but went to the one in Homs and Muhannad went to the one in Hama. We met on a joint university trip, and got married in 1995.

There was a delay in my university studies in Hama because I was arrested in the first year because of my political activity, specifically in February 1986. It was when young people were aspiring to freedom and social justice, and they tried to join groups to discuss these topics, and the topic of the Palestinian revolution. The Syrian regime of course, didn't like this, which is why they launched a campaign of arrests. They caught me with a leaflet for one of the Syrian parties, and because of this leaflet I remained in detention for a year, even though I was a member of a Palestinian organization loyal to the regime at that time. Prison was a harsh experience. Compared to the experience of the detainees during the current Syrian revolution though, it was less difficult, but it was very harsh at the time.

We lived in Damascus, with Muhannad's family in Masaken Barzeh. They gave us a flat and we lived in it. We had Ali and Omar, our sons. I was an English language teacher and Abu Ali was dedicated to national work. He is a veterinarian but only in recent years has been practicing his profession, he has been more busy with politics. Our home was almost an office. Young men and women used to come to us on a daily basis. We felt alive in this house and our lives were very beautiful. For example, it was normal for one of these young men to call us at 1am and ask us: "Do you have food?" to which we responded "Welcome. The house is always open." Of course, I had a commitment to my national duties and I was active in the women's office.

I was like all the Palestinian youth who were associated with the national factions as part of the ongoing process of liberating Palestine and ending the Zionist occupation. I used to see my role within the Fatah Intifada movement in those days because of the positions we took on the issue of settlement and our position on the nature of the conflict. We dreamed that the intifada that we carried out in 1983 against Yasser Arafat and his approach would constitute a pioneering national movement with a better national program and a better organizational tool. This was our concept, and we tried our best. Anyone who knows me knows that neither I nor my comrades have spared any effort to do something more positive. We made a very big effort. We succeeded in some cases, but in the end, we failed after many years due to circumstances beyond our control. It remains that this national struggle that one has practiced has contributed to the development of people's awareness around it on various levels. We tried to contribute to raising the national sentiment in various sectors, and interacted with them at the political and cultural levels, and at the level of social activity and artistic activity such as drawing, caricature, poetry and story. Most of my activity was within the student community at Damascus University and other Syrian universities. The Palestinian student world extends to other countries such as Jordan, and the Gulf. We tried our best.

After the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri in 2005<sup>[32]</sup>, it became clear that a new order was taking place by agreement among the movement's leadership, in whole or in part, and the Syrian intelligence, to form a Sunni Islamist situation in Lebanon that would serve as opposition to the Hariri movement at that time. For this reason, they sought the assistance of Hajj Shaker al-Absi and some of the groups he knew, most of whom were from the remaining elements of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who were entering and leaving Syria, and gave them places to stay in Lebanon, including Ain al-Hilweh, Shatila, and al-Burj. In the next stage, this bloc rebelled against the movement, and then left for the Nahr al-Bared camp in Tripoli. On 20 May 2007, the bloody Nahr Al-Bared events began, after which the

[32] Lebanon's former Prime Minister

camp was destroyed. This event caused a major crisis within the movement. The Syrians tried to place the responsibility on Abu Khaled al-Amlah. He was arrested, placed under house arrest, and dismissed from the movement, to be handed over to Abu Musa. In other words, the internal situation in the movement was tumultuous and scattered, leaving a very marginal group formed by Abu Musa and Abu Hazem Saghir (Ziad Saghir), who were directly connected the Syrian intelligence. This led to the expulsion of a large part of the Fatah Al-Intifada organization i.e. almost all of those in Syria, in addition to a large segment in Lebanon and in Jordan.

## The revolution began

At the beginning of the Syrian revolution, we lived in our flat in Masaken Barzeh. It was strategically located in front of Security Branch 211<sup>[33]</sup> and next to it was the Military Police, Al Rahba and Special Units, meaning that we were within a security area. But we were also very close to Qaboun, about a 10-minute walk away. Demonstrations began on Fridays in Barzeh al-Balad and Qaboun in April 2011. In the first week, there were clashes with stones. They brought in municipal workers to beat people with sticks, and in the second week the shootings started. During the next month and a half, thirty-five people were martyred in Barzeh al-Balad on Fridays, in addition to those who were wounded and arrested. Although the demonstrations were very peaceful in those days, and not one single shot was fired at the security forces, and people were chanting and cheering — yet, when they gathered, they got shot and sniped. The same happened in Qaboun.

I remember one time we were counting ambulances coming from Barzeh. It was a Friday demonstration, and only one street separated us from Barzeh al-Balad, and our flat was only a 100 or 200 meters away from it. We heard voices coming from the demonstrations, but we weren't able to enter or leave because security closed the area. Demonstrations were actually taking place inside Barzeh. We were waiting for the demonstrations to begin, and then we would hear the sound of shooting, but we didn't know what was going on there. Me and my husband Muhannad and everyone else in our street were counting the ambulances that were passing through — 56 cars to Ibn Al-Nafis Hospital alone. Then we saw ambulances coming to Security Branch 211, 5 or 6 of them. Then we learned that the ambulances that arrived at the security branch were killed in it. This was in April 2011, but I don't remember what particular Friday.

The revolution may have come too late. But it came at the moment when we desperately needed the change, a need for someone to throw a stone into the swamp to move the stagnant, murky water. There was a need to rebuild the country democratically on the ba-

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[33] The tech branch or the digital branch in the Military Intelligence Division.



sis of freedom and dignity, in order for a person to preserve their dignity, and to feel that their country is truly their homeland and not a farm for the Assad family. Everyone who lived in Syria witnessed tyranny arrests, corruption, looting and starvation. All the catalysts for the revolution in Syria were already existing.

On the other hand, one of the proverbs says: “Whoever confronts an enemy while he is in chains, let him know that his chains are his first enemy.” The Syrian regime restricted all efforts of popular resistance to Zionism, and destroyed all national and party structures and political formations that tried playing a role in resisting Zionism. Salvation from this and other Arab regimes, and building a national democratic system based on elections, will be a prelude to resisting Zionism, and a prelude to launching a long-term war against this entity. I am absolutely certain that all the support that the Assad regime receives from America, Israel, and the entire western and eastern political community is to prevent the victory of the Syrian revolution, which, if it were to overthrow the regime, would have spread to all Arab countries. These regimes, including the Syrian regime, worked to suppress all forms of freedoms and democracy, and supported all forms of political, religious and social tyranny, so that the Arab citizen would remain ignorant, and live past struggles through which he does not identify with in his present or his future.

I am, quite simply, one of those Syrians who dreamt of freedom and social justice. I dreamt of living in a country where I am able to express my opinion, able to belong to a party, for example. The revolution was this awaited dream, and that is why I invested in it with everything I had.

We did not participate in the demonstrations, as circumstances and our health did not help us to, but we took part in the revolution in other ways. We interacted with those in charge of activism, providing medical or humanitarian aid, and also engaged in propaganda and political activities. However, I couldn't take part in the demonstrations, especially if they included running. I have cardiac issues, and I no longer have the ability as before. But we were trying to provide any form of human, material and medical support possible. By virtue of my work as a veterinarian in the Damascus countryside, or as we used to call it “the fiery arc”, we interacted a lot with the residents of the area. I mean, sometimes some capabilities were available, and we offered them to the activists there without failure.

I also did not participate in the demonstrations. On some occasions, Abu Ali and I, along with other young men, had to provide medical assistance to a wounded person here or an injured person there. I took part in the funeral ceremonies that were held in Qaboun or in Barzeh, for example. I remember the presence of Mai Skaf, Fares Al-Helou and Muntaha Al-Atrash during the Qaboun massacre. I was working in a public school, so my participation was difficult, but my students were from Barzeh and Qaboun, so my attendance at those events mattered a lot to me.

I often used my relationships as a veterinarian and by virtue of my knowledge of many medical workers, to secure some supplies such as vaccines, antibiotics and first aid kits. Or we asked other doctors to help treat the wounded. We have done this in many situations and areas, not only in our area.

On one occasion, a young man was injured in Hajar al-Aswad, and they took him to the Palestinian Society Hospital. The hospital was bombed and they had to evacuate it, but the young man was wounded in the neck and his injury was very serious. His friends brought him to his aunt's house, who called her relatives for help, but they were afraid because of the seriousness of the situation. It was 2012 and she lived in a highly-secure area where it was difficult to move around. The young man's aunt was my friend, and she called me. She was afraid because the young man was bleeding and his condition was very dangerous. I never forgot our visits to him, we used to take gauze and medication to treat his wound.

## The revolution in Qaboun and Barzeh

The continuation of the killings by the regime pushed people to defend themselves in one way or another, so arming began, and some parties began supplying groups with weapons. The regime itself was leaving behind weapons in different regions. Qaboun became armed before Barzeh al-Balad, which remained peaceful until 2013. After that, Qaboun was subjected to heavy and unjust bombing from the air force, in addition to artillery, tanks and continuous intrusion attempts. The people of Qaboun were unjustly displaced as well.

We were correcting the baccalaureate and ninth grade exams in July 2012. The scenes that we had previously seen in the series “The Palestinian Displacement”, we began seeing in real life. People came out of Qaboun towards the Abbasiyeen bus station. A wave of people. Women, children and elderly. The women in Qaboun were mostly veiled and wore black robes. It was painful and undignified to see these women escaping in their nightgowns and slippers. It was very sad to see these women leaving their homes and walking towards the Abbasiyeen bus station in this way. After that, we heard that some of them continued walking towards the villages of Jabaadin and Tel Vita.

They all originally hailed from the villages in Qalamoun.

It will never be erased from my memory. The scene from “The Palestinian Displacement” was extremely reminiscent of our current situation.

The parks in Masaken Barzeh were filled with the people from Qaboun. All the parks that were originally children’s parks were filled with families. Despite all this pain, a beautiful scene permeated this sadness. The residents of Masaken Barzeh, including the “rougher” residents, started asking each other: Who has a bed, a quilt, or extra clothes. And they started collecting what helped these families to survive.

On that day, the people from Qaboun would pass through the Masaken Road. Many people left water, dates, or things for the children who were with their mothers at the doors of their buildings.

The interaction was very interesting. Although no one offered the displaced shelter in their own home, but everyone tried to help as much as they could.

At that time, the bombing continued. We were counting the time. Every four hours, there was an hour or half an hour’s rest. We could see the plane hitting.

“Helicopters are bombarding the city”

One time, they shot down a plane. We celebrated that day as if it was an Israeli plane. It was the same plane that was bombing us day and night.

It hurt so much that it was flying above us and bombing Qaboun.

In the periods of calm, when the bombing stopped, we were even more afraid. Of course the electricity was cut off. They would throw light bombs and everything would be splashed in red color. The silence lasted for about half an hour or more, a great silence — only for us to know the next day that a massacre occurred during that silence. We knew some of the victims of the massacre, such as a teacher with us at school, and one of my students and his parents. We identified them. July 2012 was the ugliest month because of the intensity of tension and fear that we experienced while that plane did not stop bombing. Not only Qaboun was bombed, but Barzeh and Rukn al-Din were bombed simultaneously as well; but their greatest focus was on Qaboun. It seemed that their objective was to displace people from it.

I remember in the beginning of 2013, I was in the street standing and watching a MiG-21 drop missiles on Barzeh al-Balad.

Like most women in the area, I went to sleep in my outdoor clothes, just in case something might happen. One time I fell asleep and woke up to the sound of bombardment in a state between reality and dream. It was a nightmare. I checked on Muhannad and the children and was assured that they were present and asleep, then I opened the door of the house and went out without noticing the clock. I walked for about a hundred meters, completely deranged, and when our neighbor Abu Bassam, an old man who was probably going to the bakery, saw me, he was surprised and said to me: “Umm Ali, where are you going?” I answered him: “I want to see the the direction of bombing. Is it Rukn al-Din, or Barzeh, or Qaboun?” He said: “Dear God. Go back to your home.” It was 3 or 4 in the morning.

At the end of 2012 Barzeh was besieged. Barzeh is a small area, practically one square kilometer in size, but it is surrounded on all sides by security offices/facilities; From the mountain side, there was the Tishreen Research Center, which had turned into a barracks, and to the north was a military barracks, and there were also the military police, special units, and intelligence. They all surrounded old Barzeh. But despite that, people stood up to them, especially since the revolutionaries maintained their control over the orchards that connect them to Ghouta. And their communication with Harasta continued, even to Ghouta, despite the siege. The very courageous youth in the region withstood the various attacks of the regime, which included airstrikes, and yet they remained steadfast until the displacement agreement.

We were not staying within the siege area, we were staying in the vicinity of the siege. But I had contact with people in Barzeh and I was aware of what was happening. In the early days of the revolution, the regime had targeted all the activists in the Barzeh Al-Balad CSOs. I don't remember the names, but they were seven young men in the CSOs who were liquidated and sniped over a period of weeks. I think this happened in most areas. Later, when the siege became more severe, people began to arm themselves and try to secure themselves. The regime had further mobilized its shabiha from various sides. For example, in the area of Ish al-Warwar, which is a mountain overlooking Barzeh, many security officers lived, and members of the army were also using the area for sniping and for continuous shooting at Barzeh. On the other hand, the people of Barzeh tried to defend themselves towards Ish al-Warwar and towards Tishreen Hospital. Indeed, they succeeded in forming a very strong internal system. For example, I remember in 2012-2013 that they had organized all administrative matters. How to distribute food, bread and any form of medical support or catering, to be distributed and communicated to everyone. Later, after we got out of there, I heard that they were betrayed by Islamic forces, specifically Jabhat al-Nusra, which took control of the Harasta region and closed the roads in front of them. This was what prompted them to reconcile with the regime.

### **The first time we left our house**

In February 2013 we were trying to live a normal life when an explosion occurred at Branch 211, right next to our house. I was in school, my children were in their schools, and Abu Ali was at work. At about 10 or 11 in the morning there was a very big explosion. And then we learned that it was near our house. Then helicopters appeared in the sky and started dropping bombs. I didn't know if there were clashes or if it was just a random bombing. We were afraid that one of our students would be injured at school, and one of my students was actually injured in the side, but he survived. Communication in the area was cut off. I was able to bring my young son Omar from his school which was next to ours. The closest safe place we could go to was the house of Abu Ali's sister. We discovered when we went to her house that everyone from the family like us came to her as well, and her house suddenly turned into a camp. I brought three or four of my female colleagues with me who could not go to their homes because the area was completely closed off. We stayed there until about evening and they started saying that there was a road we could leave from. When we tried to go to our house, we discovered that they had declared the area a military zone.

We tried to go back to our homes but they started shooting at us in the air to prevent us from getting close. On the second day, they said we can go back, and we came back to at least fetch some of our things.

It was cold and we needed our winter clothes

We entered our house from the back. The glass was all broken. The balconies above us collapsed onto our house. Security was “digging up the house, digging up all the details”. We went in to get some things and left. As I opened the door, I heard a noise outside the house. Fifty or sixty people were pointing guns at us. We told them we were going out, so they shouted into the microphone: “All residents must evacuate. We declared the area a military zone.” This reminded me of Kafr Qassem and the events of the occupied territories when they said: “It is a military zone, it is forbidden for anyone to move, it is forbidden for anyone to leave.” In fact, we were all expelled from the area and we were absent for days. When people in Golan left in 1967, they settled them there. They were destitute and poor, and they had nowhere else to go in case they were expelled. Most of them were state employees and they started making contacts and mediations to not be displaced. The decision was to bulldoze the entire area so that it becomes a safe area for the security services.

We heard later that when clashes occurred with the security forces, one of the attackers was wounded and entered one of the houses, and they burned the house and the houses next to it. I remember that nine civilians from our neighbors, from the neighborhood, were killed in these clashes. One of them was a grocery shop owner, an old woman, a young man, and others who are not related.

One time we tried to enter the house, our neighbor was crying and someone was trying to console her and said, “You’re not the only one”. It seemed like they burned her house down, too. She said, “I am not crying for the house, I am crying for Joud”, (perhaps her son or her nephew). “He’s been wrapped for 3 days in a mat, and we aren’t able to bury him.”

“No one dared say that someone was killed in a clash, because they would consider that person a terrorist.”

We did not live one comfortable day after this bombing. We went home when they let us in twenty-two days later. We used plastic instead of glass, which was broken, we removed the rubble that was on the floor. It was a terrifying thing.

“It is a crowded area. It is considered pro-regime.”

Omar was young and I was holding his hand and walking down the street when we saw three bodies on the ground. When I went to school, the boys would say to me: “Miss, today we saw a head in the trash bin at school.” It became normal for children to see decapitated heads on their way to school.

Then, while we were on our way back from school, a sniper’s bullet passed near Omar’s head. After we got home, we received a call from a special number, and he said: “If we wanted to, we would have shot him in the head.”

In the last period, my wife and I were targeted.

Even my relatives, considering that I am Alawite, said: “If she wants to come, she will come and she will bring her children with her, but her husband is banned from coming. We will protect her and her children, but not her husband.” We were left with no choice but to leave the country, it was better and safer for the family. We left for Turkey on 6 April 2013.

### **The journey of a 1000 miles began**

We made the decision to leave quickly on the advice of many friends after the threats of arrest and even death. We worked to raise a sum of money here and there. We contacted one of our friends who had gone to Sweden and he gave us the number of a smuggler. We called him, and he said: “Go to Aleppo, and from Aleppo we will help you.” At that time, transportation was difficult. There was a bus leaving at six in the morning from the Abbasid garage towards Aleppo. “We fixed our situation as a family, we took some items with us, and we left.” The journey to Aleppo would have taken three or four hours on normal days, but that day it took more than ten hours.

We left at 5:30 in the morning from the house of the sister of Abu Ali in Masaken Barzeh, to reach the roundabout of death in Aleppo at 5 in the afternoon.

We passed through various checkpoints, but it seemed that our names had not been circulated yet. It was possible that it was because of our age. “Two elderly people with children, no one bothered to search us.” We arrived in Aleppo and the situation there was very tense. We searched for the smuggler and found him. They call him the Sheikh, with a white beard and a white galabiya (loose fitted gown worn by men and women). We rode a small white minibus towards Bab al-Hawa Road from the Idlib side, and he told us: “When you arrive at the checkpoint, tell him we are from the camp,” as a result of the good reputation of the Aleppo camp with the regime. Indeed, when we arrived at the checkpoint, they asked the driver: “Do you have anything?” He said, “He has a laptop.” I told him,



“I’m a vet and all my work is on it.” He asked me: “Where are you from?” I told him: “From the camp.” He said: “Go, go.”

We crossed the checkpoint and entered the areas under the control of the so-called revolutionaries, different groups, some who were Islamist and others militant. They stopped us at a checkpoint to see our identities. One of the officers read our surname - Khaddour - and he knew that al-Makhram was a town with an Alawite majority, so he told me: “You need to step out of the car”. He was from one of the villages that knew the sectarian divisions of the other villages. I told him: “What do you mean that she needs to step out of the car? Do you really think that we are pro-regime while we pass through this checkpoint with all this reassurance?” He was ashamed and said to us: “You can go.” His supervisor came and overheard our conversation and said: “Go on, leave.”

It is shameful that the revolutionaries, or those who consider themselves revolutionaries, deal with this sectarian division. They make us live in a state of tension and frustration. Part of our leaving Damascus was due to this same frustration. I mean, my wife could go to her family to protect her, but they would not be able to protect me; I, too, was not able to take my family to Ghouta. The young men there advised me: “Do not take your wife, because they are like stubborn mules.” Simply so. We saw what happened with those who were in Ghouta; Razan Zaytouna, Samira Al-Khalil and others. Later, the very revolutionaries we knew were executed by Jaish al-Islam. We are between a rock and a hard place, between the ruthless regime, and the groups that hijacked the Syrian revolution, such as Jaish al-Islam and other Islamic groups in the countryside of Hama, Idlib, Aleppo and other parts of Syria.

We finally reached Bab al-Hawa, and with difficulty we crossed the border. There was a Turkish policeman who seemed to “know” the smuggler. Maha is of Syrian nationality, so he allowed her to pass, but he prevented us, Ali and Omar and I, because we are Palestinians. I pleaded with him. Showed him money. Omar was allowed to enter because he was young, and a little later he allowed Ali, and then he told me: “I will allow you to enter, but jump over that wall over there”. So I walked about fifty meters and they lifted me and I jumped over to the other side.

## Moving around in many Turkish cities

We got into the smuggler's car and drove away. We arrived at Iskenderun around midnight. They took us to an apartment in a tourist resort, where three other families were also on the smuggling route. A family from Neirab camp, a man and his wife from Yarmouk, and a woman also from Yarmouk. We stayed with them until the next day. We were exhausted to an unimaginable degree. The next day we moved to another place within the same tourist complex. We stayed there for about twenty days while we were waiting. The smuggler would come to show us photos and passports and compare if they looked like us or not.

On April 29 or 30, 2013, a group of about thirty young men, Turks of Syrian origin, from Iskenderun came to the tourist complex where we were staying. They were armed — and they fired two bullets in the air in front of the house and said, “You have ten minutes to vacate the house.” They were followers of Ali Kayali, who carried out the Al-Bayda massacre in Banyas. And they were chasing the Syrians. They said, “If you were with Bashar, you wouldn't come here.”

They literally said to us: “They are dogs against Bashar. We don't want them here.” I thought of negotiating with them for a bit, so I said to one of them: “Have you seen any ill-will from us? I am a teacher and he is a doctor.” I used the letter Qaf a lot to make it known that I am Alawite since they were also Alawites. (Note: The letter Qaf ق in Arabic is used frequently in the dialect of Alawite communities in Syria). I said, “Did you see any of us unemployed? We would like to sit with our children and live in safety with you, my brother.” He had told us before that we had ten minutes to vacate the house. He looked at us, apparently he was in charge of the rest, and said: “Am I even obliged to give you an answer?” I told him: “No, you are not obliged”, and he then told us: “You have five minutes.”

Indeed, we took a few small things and left the house.

We did not take our clothes.

I didn't take my medication. I came back later for it.

It was a real evacuation.

We were eating and the food was left on the table and we couldn't put it back in the fridge. Our mattress was still on the floor. After a few hours, after negotiating with the resort guard, we were able to enter to get our things and my medication. I fetched my insulin and heart medications.

The lady in charge of the rent was a woman named Suhaila, who lived in the area. She told them: “Shame on you for dealing with people like this. These are decent people who paid one month’s rent in advance, and you shouldn’t evacuate them.” They responded to her with dirty insults, and she was an old woman, not a young woman. The supervisor or security officer of the resort told Muhannad: “Doctor, don’t bother yourself. They will bury you here and no one will ever know or care about you and your family. Do not be rude or argue. I feel that it is a great injustice, but you can’t do anything. We apologize to you.” We remained silent and left.

We were waiting to travel. We rented in Iskenderun for two months. We lived in Istanbul for about six months, and for about ten months in Gaziantep.

We moved to Istanbul to increase our possibilities to leave for Europe. Our goal was to travel and we didn’t want to stay in Turkey because we didn’t see a future for ourselves there. At that time, it was not easy for Syrian children to go to school. When we lived in Istanbul, we tried. They told us that there was an Islamic association called “Al-Nour Association” through which we can enroll our children. The fees were high, and they had conditions. For example, one of their conditions, because of which they rejected our children, was that their mother was not veiled. This is why the children remained without schools in Istanbul. We stayed there for several months and the situation was terrible, two children of school age and nothing to do. When we saw children from the window carrying their bags on their way to school, it brought tears to our eyes.

In Istanbul, we rented a temporary apartment from a real estate office. And in this apartment something very horrible happened to us. It seemed that we were targeted for theft. Usually we were very careful with the amount of money we had. But on this day, I expect that whoever robbed us had sprayed anesthetic gas, because we were all drowsy by about ten or eleven o’clock. We actually went to sleep and did not hide our things. Umm Ali had taken off her bracelets and rings and left them with the money on the table. We usually hid them. The burglars probably knew of many ways to open the doors — with cards and by means we do not know, or they had a key in agreement with the real estate office. It was very suspicious, as the surveillance cameras that capture faces at the door of the house were broken, and the other cameras only capture the lower body.

When I woke up, I searched for my mobile phone, but I could not find it. I saw our things scattered. I also searched to find that they had taken my mobile phone because it was new and the money and Maha’s gold were also gone. We estimated the total stolen items to be around 30,000USD. I only had 100USD left.

We were talking to the police and crying while they were laughing as if they were watching a comedy. Their attitude was really strange. Then they said: “Syrian, Syrian,” meaning that a Syrian like us stole from us. They did not cooperate with us at all.

We are thinking of a way to reduce costs as much as possible. Our friends told us we could find cheaper housing in Gaziantep, and maybe even work. We traveled by bus for seventeen hours. We found a very small house, a dorm studio, and we rented it. We discovered there that Ali can go to school to study a literary baccalaureate in a Libyan high school that teaches in Gaziantep. I found a job as a translator for a newspaper. And Abu Ali started writing articles.

I worked for the “We Are All Syrians” newspaper, which was founded by a group of activists, some of whom were detained by the regime. They wanted to amplify the issues of Syrian refugees and the issue of national unity among Syrians. I used to write articles for it, but my main task was translating from foreign magazines or newspapers to convey to Syrian audiences what they wrote about Syria. I was fond of that experience.

I wrote with more than one newspaper; “We are all Syrians,” “Our Syria,” and “Zaytoun” — all Syrian activist groups from different regions. I wrote many opinion articles or even some research on Syria in general and on some Palestinian camps.

I also contributed to Zeitoun and The Syrian Observer in London.

The Syrian Observer translates Arabic articles into English and publishes them for foreigners. I wrote for them for quite a while. I mean, at least I tried. I also interacted with the so-called opposition with its various spectra. I am one of the people who felt that they didn’t belong to that environment during those days.

It is true that our cause is like that of all Syrians, but the leaders on the ground do not represent us, and that is why we felt that we didn’t belong. If these are the leaders of the movement, we do not want it. We just want to live more peacefully.

Practically, the Islamists controlled many aspects of the Syrian revolution in Turkey and on the ground. Neither the leftists nor the moderates were decision makers, and they did not have an integrated project in the first place. They were groups and individuals scattered here and there. Those who had leverage were powers within; Islamist groups from al-Nusra and ISIS. As for the forces associated with Turkey, or with some other countries and behind them the Americans, or the so-called democrats, they were separatist, non-integrated groups. One tried to communicate and put forward ideas, and I’m not alone, but there was nothing that matched our aspirations.

We tried a lot. But we always felt distant. We didn't succeed.

For the sake of immigration, we knocked on all the doors of the European embassies in Istanbul.

We were trying to leave legally.

They used to say that they would accept us for asylum in their country when we got there. They said that when we get to Sweden they will give us asylum, or when we get to Holland they will give us asylum. How do we arrive?

By smuggling.

In the sense that we pay everything we have for this mafia that controls the smuggling routes. This is what happened after many failed attempts, and after the difficulties Maha faced at the airport in Turkey. My young son Omar traveled to Sweden and applied for a family reunification for us.

## Finally to Sweden

We arrived in early September 2014 and stayed in a town called Oduvala near Göteborg, roughly in the south of Sweden.

We enrolled the children in schools, and now, thank God, they have come a long way. They are in universities now.

We also worked. From the very beginning we learned and started quickly. I worked about a month and a half after we arrived. They needed an Arabic-speaking English teacher for a school with Syrian students who were children of refugees. The children did not understand the Swedish teacher's explanation, and that is why they needed this position, and I started working there. After that, I began to teach Arabic as a first language. I became mainly an English teacher, and I started teaching Arabic as well. I continued my studies at Göteborg University. One does not feel how one spends one's day here. We need to count the hours of the day, is it sufficient or not? The working hours are long, followed by the study hours, after which we must learn other skills necessary to adapt to the society here. For example, it never occurred to me that I would learn to drive a car, but it has become very necessary to be able to reach the different schools in which I want to work. One of the conditions of work is that I need to have a driver's license, which is why it was necessary for me to learn to drive. In addition to learning Swedish, of course.

I completed language studies and got a job with the municipality. I taught a subject they called "Samhall" which means society. I teach Swedish laws, customs, traditions and labor laws to new refugees in Arabic. After that, I found an opportunity to follow a quick course in my specialty in veterinary medicine, so I studied it and got a certificate as a veterinary nurse or assistant. Then I found a job in a clinic where I work now.

The nature of the people here is completely different from our country. They are not as social as we are, but it is possible to establish relationships with this society. When the language is good it becomes easier to communicate with people. We have good relations with Swedish families and we visit each other. Their ages are different, some of them are old and some are our age.

We feel positive here — they respect people. From the first moment I entered this country they treated me like a human being. But the feeling of regret remains that we had to travel. I am not very happy that we came to Sweden. What threw us to Sweden is the hardship we endured in Syria. When we left, we had reached an age when one would think about how to retire rather than start a new life. We lost many by leaving; Some of them stayed in Syria, and some of them left to different countries. We lost social relations, we lost friends,

and we lost the intimacy that we used to have with our family, our home, our history and our memories. I feel nostalgic for all of this, I feel heartbreak. I hope that everything will be resolved and that things will reach a place that will allow people to return to their homes. But I think this is very difficult as long as the same political conditions exist. This regime is supported and will continue to exist. We can't go back.

Under this regime, our return is a very difficult matter. Unfortunately, I feel that it is too far a dream for me personally. But I hope. I hope we will have democratic elections. And then whoever represents me becomes president of the country, I will definitely return to Syria.

We've come a long way here. My son is going to be a lawyer now and my second son is studying engineering. They became distinct individuals. Here, children don't want to study in universities. They prefer professional work and short studies. The important thing is that they work.

We did everything we could for our children and our survival. From the first day of our arrival we rented a room in a small family owned hotel. We arrived at 10 in the evening. The next day, when the owner of the hotel woke up at 6:30 in the morning, he saw me and Muhannad, each one of us typing on their computer. He came and asked us in English: What are you doing? Are you communicating with your family? We told him: No, we are working. He asked: What are you doing — it's only been a few hours since you arrived! We told him: We are working on articles for newspapers in Turkey and London, and we must deliver them within two days. The man was surprised by us, as we only arrived a few hours ago, and yet were sitting and completing our work. So he brought his wife and introduced her to us. We were able to distinguish ourselves from others in a very short period of time. They found that we did not come to live as a burden on the country or on anyone.

When we went to the employment office, the person responsible there asked me: "Do you want to work?" I said to her: "Of course. If there is work, find work for us from today. I don't want to take help from anyone." Luckily, they needed an English teacher who was fluent in Arabic, and that was me. Abu Ali, although he did not immediately find a job, began to learn the language. As for the children, our greatest concern was that they continue their studies and graduate, so that we would not feel that the years were wasted. Thankfully, Ali will now finish his master's degree while he is still a young man, twenty-four years old, and Omar is also studying at the university. I remember several Swedish newspapers interviewing us as a special family, very ready to integrate. Amnesty International also interviewed us at our home in Sweden about our immigration and integration into our new society. She kept our family story on the front page of her website for a year.



## Conclusion

When the Syrian revolution broke out in 2011, Palestinians became involved in it, as did Syrians, while some Palestinian political and military forces associated with the Syrian regime participated in its repressive practices, which mainly affected Palestinians. Finally, a third group, including many Palestinian-Syrians, believed that they should adopt a position of neutrality. However, the enormity of the Syrian crisis did not leave much room for distancing oneself from it, as some Palestinian camps were subjected to sieges and bombardment, as told in the previous testimonies.

Events in these active camps took the same turn of siege and bombardment, most famously in Yarmouk camp. Protests emerged and escalated in parallel with the increase of the regime's crackdown on the camps, starting with shootings and arrests, and ending with indiscriminate shelling, artillery and airstrikes. Then the siege came which led to humanitarian disasters and ended with military campaigns carried out by the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies, militias and Russians, then forcibly displacing the remaining groups and residents in green buses to northern Syria, and imposing "reconciliation" on those who want to stay without adequate security guarantees.

Most of the testimonies in this report showed that the regime committed the crime of forced displacement, and illegally evicted individuals and residents from their homes on which they reside, whether directly or indirectly during the conflict. Forcing civilians to leave their place of residence was not necessary for their safety or imperative to military necessity, and the conflict cannot be used to justify displacement.

Legally, based on the unpublished "Map of Forced Displacement" research, carried out by TDA, the crimes of forced displacement committed by the Syrian regime can be described as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and even crimes of persecution. As all the criteria for these crimes were fulfilled, and included people moving against their will from their places of residence without legal justifications, through arrest, harassment, and even besiegement, bombing and intimidation. It was also very clear the realization that the displacements were going to happen in the normal course of events. Since these displacements occurred in the context of an armed conflict, they are considered war crimes. In addition, their occurrence as part of a widespread and systematic attack against a population makes them crimes against humanity. Moreover, these displacements are considered crimes of persecution because they were committed against specific groups due to their political orientations.

Because it is useless to ask the authorities responsible for these crimes for any review of their policies or compensation, then the discourse must be directed in two directions; The first is that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) should take responsibility for those displaced Palestinian refugees in the north as long as they are registered with it, and are still within the geographical framework of its work. The agency should at least facilitate and guarantee the delivery of aid to the refugees.

The second direction is for civil society organizations operating in northern Syria, to address the problem of poor integration, which appeared from most testimonies, with the host communities. The issue of integration is mainly economic in this case, and is represented by house rents and competition for the few available job opportunities, which may require housing solutions or support for operating projects. Cultural and social aspects of integration can also be addressed through specially designed programmes, community dialogue sessions, or activities that remind members of local communities of the Palestinian crisis and raise awareness on the second crisis, which involves displaced Palestinians in the Syrian revolution — who equally with Syrians — were subject to oppression, siege and uprooting.

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