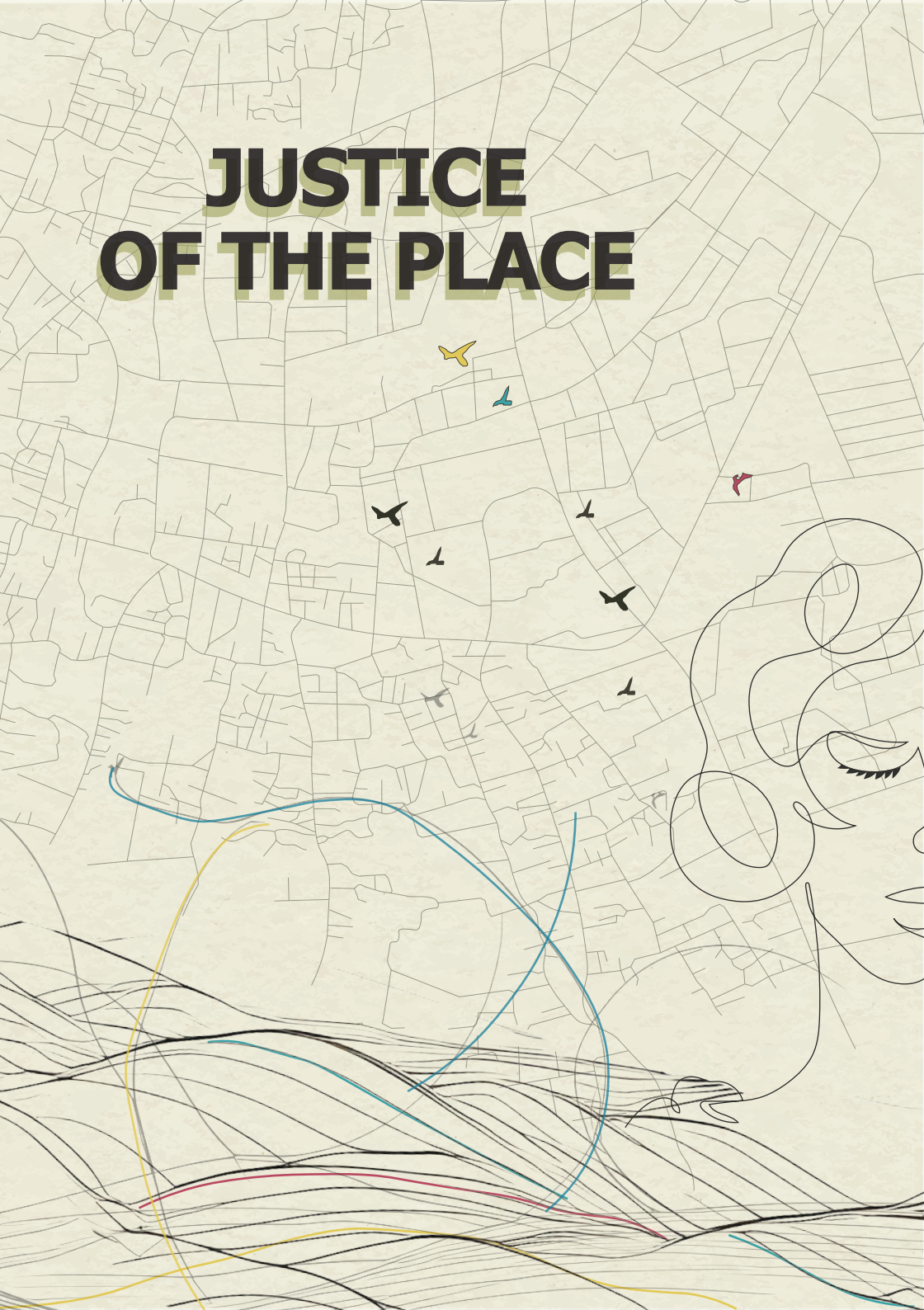


JUSTICE OF THE PLACE



Justice of the Place

Zabadani, Madaya, and Darayya

“If my soul was enough, I would give it to my house in exchange for everything returning to the way it was. Many homeowners, both men and women, have either died or disappeared, and if those of us who survived were to go back, we would return broken, beaten, and with great sorrow in our hearts. Homes have souls that leave when their owners depart.” (Al-Dimashqiya, Al-Zabadani).

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Preface

We memorised the place we called home, its details, its corners, and its streets, and they, in turn, memorised us. Home is where we would become whole; a complete unit whose parts would remind one another lest they ever forget. Our identities grew alongside that of our home and would change irreversibly once we left. We were fond of so many of its details, while also despised many others. While at times our presence in it felt suffocating, at other times it made us happy to be able to call it home. In the mornings as we would leave the house, we would greet some people while discreetly avoiding others, just as we'd befriend certain neighbours while growing irritated by others. We planned our days based on its details; its main streets and hidden alleyways, the public transport routes, and local stores where we would buy our daily necessities.

Our bodies grew in it and our features evolved along with it. The sun tainted the colour of our skin as we played outside. The scents surrounding the place crept into our pores and became a part of us. Our voices and those of our children, the honking of cars, and the jumbled noises of the streets formed the soundtrack of our auditory memory. Some dreams grew while we lived in it, while others changed or were abandoned entirely. We were happy, and we were sad, we laughed and we cried, and the walls of our homes, the rooms, kitchens, and balconies learned to feel our feelings. We shared our secrets with it, and it shared its secrets back with us. Our fantasies, daydreams, and daily realities were painted on its walls. We can recall the story of every object inside our homes, how and when they came to belong to us, and us to them. We would gather frequently with family and friends in it. Sometimes the gatherings filled us with joy, and other times they burdened us with heaviness and anger. We learned to love ourselves in that place, while

at other times we couldn't help but despise ourselves. We could feel the greatest sense of safety, while equally feeling afraid in our own home. But regardless of any fears, we always felt the security of our home standing tall and strong, of the fact it would always be there.

This place, with its spirit and noises, its people, colours, and smells, no longer exists except seared deep into our memories. We have been kept in places and lands far away and deprived from returning to it. And yet it continues to speak to us, and we to it. Everything got turned upside down when they came killing with their weapons and armsⁱ, putting an end to the life that had pulsed throughout our neighbourhoods, replacing it with death, loneliness, fear, insecurity, alienation, and longing. Displacing us from our home was a crime not just against us but against the place as well.

We narrate the details of our lives, our memories, and our homes in the hope of achieving some justice for us and for the places we lost and yearn to regain. We write our narratives so that they can be spread far and wide, be read by those who have experienced similar fates, and for future generations to learn about what their ancestors suffered and survived.

The lines written in this text were inspired by the words of twenty-seven Syrian women who were forced to leave their homes and neighbourhoods. They shared with us their memories and feelings of events, conversations, belongings, and people, from the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011 through to the breakout of full-scale war which continues to this day without respite. These women believe that narrating and documenting the stories of their former lives and the places they lost is a way for them to obtain a modicum of justice that has not yet

ⁱ This refers to the Syrian Regime Forces and their allied parties who committed crimes of bombardment, besiegement, and displacement.

been served.

If you were to remove the “we” from the previous text and turned it into a first-person narrative, it would represent the voice of every woman who was forcibly displaced from her home, neighbourhood, area, and people. This is the all-encompassing feeling shared by every woman who narrated her agonizing experiences of forced displacement for the purpose of this book. However, the details of each story of course differ from one woman to another: Who was she before 2011? What was she doing and what was her connection to the place? What were her goals and dreams? What happened to her, her family, and her community after that? Where did she go, what did she do, how did she participate in daily life and in the revolution? Was she displaced, besieged, injured? How was she forcibly displaced and is she still displaced? What happened to her beloved home, her area, and her people? What happened to her?

_____ **Is There Justice for the Place?**

“When I look at pictures of my house, I can tell how much it’s aged. Houses have souls just like ours; they feel, grow old, and turn desolate. My family’s house looks tired and shows signs of ageing. How I long to grasp the knocker on the entrance door and knock on it.” (Fayrouz, Madaya)

We do not always realise how interconnected our identities and sense of being are with the place to which we belong, and how much we contribute to the stories, attributes, features, sounds, and smells of our home until we are forcibly displaced and separated from it. In cases that involve leaving a place for reasons other than displacement, conflict, exile, or any kind of disaster, people may choose to migrate in search of better opportunities for work, studies, or obtaining basic rights deprived to them by their countries of origin. When they return to visit, some may find their homes standing intact, while others return to homes demolished, reformed, or transformed. The sense of nostalgia instigated by their return often triggers a desire to search for photographs that can help transport them down a lane of memories gone by. If found, the photos can bring to life the intimacy of memories otherwise trapped solitarily in their minds, sparking a joy that comes with sharing the details of their former lives. It is part of the human condition to feel a void if we are distant from our childhood homes, far from the tree we used to climb up and whose shade we used to play under when we were young, and a way to keep these memories alive is to recount these tales to our friends and loved ones, full of love and sorrow and every emotion in between.

So, imagine how one feels when those very homes and places full of childhood memories are bombed using all types of weapons, destroyed or severely damaged, our loved ones left buried under the rubble, and

those lucky enough to avoid death forcibly displaced from them. When all their features become distorted, strangers move in and new structures are built in their place, streets take on new forms, trees are cut down, colours and smells become unrecognizable. When are we denied even the right to claim ownership and return? Imagine the condition of the displaced homeowners and the homes they were displaced from. Our diverse social fabric and multi-layered personalities, a large part of which were built and accumulated after years of living in those very places? Imagine what we do in our new places of residence and in our newfound surroundings, many of which fall under a “state of emergency” and far from any real concept of spatial or psychological stability? If we were to one day return to those places, what would we find? Where are those places that we carried in our bodies, souls, and memories? How will we say that these places are ours? Where is the realistic scene that embodies the colourful descriptions we told our children, friends, and partners about those places? Will it disappear as if it simply never existed? As if we didn’t exist?

Isn’t it fair that we write about them, describe them, draw them, tell their stories, record them, and repeat them so that they do not disappear, and neither do we?

“There is no longer a house, walls, stones, or trees. It was completely blown up by regime forces, along with all the houses in the” Gulf twon” of Darayya, using explosive bombs... As for the land, it is our right, but the laws of the Syrian regime abolish the rights of detainees to maintain their property, and this is what oppresses me greatly... I will have no home if I return to Syria.” (Yasmine Sharbaji, Darayya)

Yes, the place does have a right to justice, just like the justice of its owners and its inhabitants. The place has a soul that evolves alongside the changes of those who live in it. The place has feelings that respond to the feelings of those who inhabit it or are displaced from it. We and our places are an indivisible whole, and the crime committed against us and against it has deeper dimensions which cannot simply be reduced to a law, a court, or a decision. We will not wait for local or international laws to define the specificities of what constitutes the crime of forced displacement or a violation of property rights. We will not wait for anyone to draw a map of those places, their details, and the details of our relationship to them. It is we, we who lived in those places, were forcibly displaced, and are still experiencing the repercussions of such crimes, that will take it upon ourselves to do so. Of course, this will not be the only form of justice we seek, nor do we consider it an alternative to judicial justice, but rather it is an affirmation of the necessity to achieving justice and the importance of continuing to demand it.

About the Book

This book is the first in a series of books entitled “Justice of the Place” that will cover the context of displacements that have occurred in the countryside of Damascus since 2011, recounting the words narrated by women who lived through displacement and their experiences both prior to and after leaving their homes. This book includes six personal narratives by displaced women from Zabadani, Madaya, and Darayya. Their names are Nisreen Al-Abdullah (Zabadani, Madaya), Fayrouz (Madaya), Al-Dimashqiya (Zabadani), Shuaa Alamal (Zabadani), Sumaya Al-Khawlani (Darayya), and Yasmine Sharbaji (Darayya). Subsequent books in this series will include stories of displaced women from several other areas of the outskirts of Damascus: Douma, Harasta, Saqba, Irbin, Qaboun, Buwayda, Yalda, the camp of Yarmouk, Al-Hajar Al-Aswad, and Moadamiyeh Al-Sham.

This book aims to delve into the social and relational dimensions of the losses and violations that large groups of women and their families have been subjected to because of the criminal forced displacement practiced against them by the Syrian regime and its allies. The work goes beyond the approach of focusing on the effects of a single crime, such as the crime of forced displacement, to show that many women and men have been exposed and subjected to more than one single or continued crime or violation throughout their lives, causing various types of harm to them and their families. The work also aims to show that the crime of forced displacement cannot be reduced to the effects of displacement and the forced exile to another place alone, but rather that it is a crime with multiple political dimensions on both the individual and collective level, a crime with dimensions and effects that cast a heavy shadow on the lives of its victims at every hour of every day. It is a crime that de-

stroys the collective and individual memories of people and erases the history of the places they lived in and grew up in. It is a crime in which the perpetrators deprive their victims of the right of return, of property rights, including of homes, lands, and trees, and of their right to belong to a layered social fabric that resembles them and reflects the culture of its inhabitants, to a place in which they were destined to grow up, raise their children, grow old, and eventually be buried in.

The work also aims to remove the concept of abstraction, numbering, and grouping of victims. These women are not statistics, nor groups of individuals that can be systematically placed in categories. Each woman has her own story, experience, personality, dreams, reality, joys, hopes, and losses. The act of narration and remembrance is the guarantor of humanising numbers and documents, by bringing to life the personality of each woman and how she chose to live before suffering the losses of war and displacement. Reports and policies fail to mention such details, their writers rob us of the option to list them, considering it a waste of time and effort. Consequently, personal, collective, cultural, gender, and political factors that are important for achieving transformative and comprehensive justice and for finding solutions that suit their realities, requirements, and rights will always be absent from official platforms, on both local and international levels.

A History that Only Women Can Share

Why did we choose to share the stories of six women who were forcibly displaced during the war? While we will answer this question briefly here, the proper, in-depth answer lies directly in the stories that constitute the very essence of this book.

While we value the importance of women sharing their own stories, especially during times of war and conflict, it is also worth mentioning how women's narratives have largely been absent from historical records and collective memory, in times of war as well as in peace. The absence of women and their narratives from the history of people, places, and experiences, means that the stories passed down from generation to generation are incomplete and constitute a huge void in public and collective memory. The reliance on such a partial picture of reality is in turn reflected in how history is relied upon to shape current and future events. In Syria, for example, the vast majority of the materials students read as part of the public-school curriculum constitutes tales of glory, heroism, setbacks, history-making, politics, and economics that were written by men, centre men, and reflect the perspectives of men on the world, on life, and on the respective roles of men and women in society. The Pakistani social entrepreneur Mahnoor Sargana dares to imagine a world in which women's stories are told and shared as a central part of history and collective memory culture:

“When we start school, we study history. Imagine history books being full of accurate attributions of women's contribution to history. All future leaders will grow up with the idea that women's contribution to all aspects of society is the norm. Even women themselves will reimagine their potential and dream big, with the amazing pioneering contributions of

women like them throughout history to support them. We would work for a more just world, where the goal of gender justice is within our reach.ⁱⁱ

The absence of women's narratives and writings, however, is not limited to the field of history alone. In literature, methods used by women to express themselves, their realities, and their needs and expectations, be they autobiographical accounts, personal thoughts, testimonies, or memoirs, did not constitute part of the traditional classical literary canon, a field that was largely dominated by men. Rather, writings by women authors were not considered qualified to fit in the world of literature, and neither to be categorized as a separate literary genre in and of itself.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite this being the dominant current, however, from the mid-1900s onwards, numerous feminist writers and scholars stemming from various feminist schools of thought did in fact consider autobiographical novels by women as a recognised branch of literature alongside other prominent literary genres. They noted how writings by women were more able to depict a realistic image of existing gender norms and relations through the use of particular words, terms, and expressions which men were not accustomed to using when themselves writing about women.^{iv}

In cases of war and conflict, autobiographies by women become even more important because they recount cases of gender-based violence from a personal perspective and can serve as evidence and documentation for achieving justice and providing relevant support for survivors. Likewise, testimonies written or recounted by women during times of

ii Sargana, M. (2020, October 4). Women's History Month: The Importance of Female Narratives. TheworldwithMNR. June 15, 2023, <https://www.theworldwithmnr.com/post/women-s-history-month-the-importance-of-female-narratives>.

iii Kadar, M. (Ed.). (1992). *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442674615>

iv Merrill, B. (2021). Understanding Women's Lives through Critical Feminist Perspectives. In BRILL eBooks (pp. 143–156). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004465916_010

war serve to fill the otherwise gaping hole in general knowledge on the experiences and roles of women in politics, society, and literature.

When revolutions go from peaceful to armed, all too often the presence of women and their roles and actions suddenly disappears from the narrative, with men taking center stage as leaders of the battle in both written and visual news stories. In the case of the Syrian revolution, the news cycle was quickly taken over by stories of the army bombing opposition strongholds and security services going on a rampage arresting and looting, while on the other hand armed opposition forces led the revolutionary fight on the battle fronts and took over decision-making roles for anyone living under their control. In all of this, women were nowhere to be seen. The public spaces in which women could participate politically, economically, and socially, including at demonstrations, in relief and humanitarian work, in organising and communication, were all of a sudden absent from the general discourse of war. The public space that had been available to some women during the powerful, albeit short-lived, peaceful revolution and in which they had been active and able to participate in various roles, was now an armed battlefield, with the weapons carried by men and any future course of action also. Even the victims of war, those killed, injured, or arrested became numbers, blurred between how many of them were men, women, and children.

Which brings us to the question: where are the women in all of this? What are they doing? In their homes? On the streets? In schools? In civic centres? How did they embrace the revolution? Who were they before the start of the revolution and what did they do during it? How did they deal with loss and injury, death, siege, and displacement? What decisions did they make? What happened to them during and after their forced displacement? What do they do to continue their daily, and revolutionary, work? What did they do to protect and save their families?

What happened to their bodies, their physical and mental health? What do they think of everything that has happened since 2011? How do they see their futures and what are their demands, hopes, and dreams? How do they see justice? What does the concept of having a homeland mean to them? What is the Syria they envision?

Why are these questions never asked? Why don't we hear from women or read about them?

The women who narrated their stories for this book were all somewhere at some point in time; whether at home, out on the street, at a shelter, at school, at a centre, at a hospital, on the bus, in a camp, at a detention centre, waiting at borders, passing through checkpoints. And yet, they remain absent from the international news channels and newspaper articles, from interviews and meetings, and even from the very processes that claim to talk for and about them.

These women formed their own opinions on the revolution and fought for it in a way that was unique to each one of them. They were injured and tortured. They worked and saved their families. They were besieged and starved. They came up with all kinds of ways to keep themselves, their children, and their families alive and safe. They negotiated with arms bearers and criminals. They demanded the freedom of their children from detention centres. They were arrested and suffered the torments of prison and the various societal repercussions that followed. They worked in every sector of peaceful revolutionary work, helping and saving many from all sorts of critical situations, including family members and friends or acquaintances who had taken up arms, bearing along the consequences of these men's decisions to do so. They witnessed massacres, death, and loss. They made fateful decisions that affected them and those around them. They carried the heavy and bitter feeling

of enforced ghorbeh, of being uprooted and displaced from their homes and homeland, and ending up in places they are not familiar with, are difficult to adapt to, and to which they have no sense of belonging. Many were displaced multiple times over and are still in search of a place to call home and a sense of stability with which to continue life, protect their families, and continue the revolutionary and civil work they were so dedicated to back in Syria. Many of them are subject to racist policies and attitudes in host countries which oppose their most basic rights to healthcare, education, work, and protection. They continue to exert what little energy they may have left to reach their goals and preserve a sense of dignity despite years of relentless humiliation.

We are left struck and in awe by the strength displayed by the protagonists of each story in this book, a strength at times difficult for us to even fathom, let alone relate to. As we turn the pages and let their words take us along their journey with them, the burden we feel is at times even heavier than that carried by the narrators themselves, women who were subjected to unimaginable suffering and yet found the power against all odds to get back on their feet, dust themselves off, and continue on their paths. The anxiety and fatigue they have suffered and continue to experience will affect any person of conscience. We catch our breath as we ponder and process the meaning of their words, words that bring to imagery and life their very real and lived experiences. We take breaks to regather our thoughts and continue through to the end of their stories, finding hope in the power and resilience of their words, actions, feelings, and thoughts, mixed of course with their desire to rest from the fatigue and exhaustion of war and displacement.

As we read through detailed descriptions of their places and the characters and communities that inhabited them, we are transported there, to the detail of every hidden nook, every marble arch, and every stone al-

leyway, to its pulse, its energy, its vibrancy, and life. We get to know their families and homes as we follow what happened to each one of them. We rejoice in the intimate interactions, hear the songs and laughter, and take part in the conversations. We smell the scents emanating from the orchards and the trees and plants that decorate their homes, just as we taste the food cooked with love in their bustling kitchens. The empathy and compassion we feel towards them allow us to collectively mourn the immense loss and cry over its destruction. We are angry at the injustice they were subjected to in those very same places, once so full of love and life, and we are saddened by the betrayal. As we close the chapter following their displacement, will hold our breaths with excitement as they strive to change the course of their lives. A new life awaits each one of them, one that we can hardly fathom following such harrowing experiences of besiegement, imprisonment, death, massacres, displacement, and trafficking.

This book is an indictment of the absence of women's voices in the story of the war in Syria. It is a powerful act of resistance as the women refuse to disappear from the narrative and take their lives and their stories in their own hands, and the places they left behind along with them.

It is, ultimately, a history for all Syrians, narrated and written by the women of Syria.

Justice of the Place and Spatial Justice

The concept of “justice of place” put forth in this book differs from that of “spatial justice,” though there is an overlap between the two. The term “spatial justice” was introduced and developed over the course of the last century, and is used in multiple disciplines, including in geography, architecture, and urban planning, as well as in the fields of women’s rights, feminism, and feminist geopolitics.

In the fields of geography and urban planning, the theorist and architect Edward Soja considers spatial justice to include “the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them.^v” In his book “The Search for Spatial Justice”, he adds that the root of spatial justice “is derived from the subject of ontology, or the belief that humans are spatio-temporal beings and that their behaviour is intertwined with their surroundings and limited time.^{vi}” In general, Soja tends to link social justice to the concept of place. For example, not everyone who lives in a city or region enjoys the same rights in terms of provision of green spaces, freedom of movement, and access to public services. Soja’s definition of and extensive work on spatial justice paved the way for other disciplines to begin linking place with the idea of achieving justice for the residents of the place. A number of feminist researchers have, however, pointed to a shortcoming in Soja’s definition of spatial justice. They critique its western-centric approach for ignoring the impact colonisation has had on places and lands, their history, inhabitants, laws, customs, and all sorts of power relations including along gender lines.^{vii}

v Soja, Edward W. (2009) The City and Spatial Justice. Spatial Justice, n° 01 September 2009, <https://www.jssj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/JSSJ1-1en4.pdf>

vi Soja, Edward W., ‘On the Production of Unjust Geographies’, Seeking Spatial Justice (Minneapolis, MN, 2010; online edition, Minnesota Scholarship Online, 24 Aug. 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816666676.003.0003>, accessed 7 Aug. 2023.

vii Mishuana Goeman, Mark My Words, Native Women Mapping Our Nations, 2013.

In the field of human geography, researchers tend to focus more on the role of places in the formation of identity and behaviours. They consider places to be socially constructed by individuals and groups that live in them and that there is what is called a sense of place, belonging, and attachment, and that the longer the period the group or individual lives in the place, the more profound the attachment and belonging to it amongst its inhabitants. ^{viii}

Those interested in architectural planning and human rights believe that achieving spatial justice begins with the planning that countries carry out for places and the extent of their interest in existing social relations and their awareness of the existence of marginalised groups. As an example from Syria, in a lecture given by Dr. Iyas Shaheen on the Marota residential city project in Damascus, which was proposed by the Syrian government in 2012, he criticised the idea of the new city, arguing that achieving spatial justice requires “overcoming mistakes related to planning practices that do not take into account the value of the social relations existing in the city and separate them for organisational considerations...which in turn results in focusing attention on one organisational area rather than others under the pretext of value and need. ^{ix}”

In an important article entitled “The Impact of Place on Women in the Absence of Spatial Justice ^x”, Omran Abu Mohsen offers a more intersectional analysis of spatial justice, linking the impact of the state’s harmful urban planning policies to marginalised groups such as Syrian women in the context of war. He discusses the impact of the absence of spatial justice for women, particularly from working class areas of Da-

viii Azmi, F. (2014, April 24). Changing Place Attachment and Belonging among Internally Displaced Women: Implications for Durable Solutions to Displacement.

ix [On the topic of Spatial justice in Damascus. An interview with “Syrian Researchers” about the research contribution in the first reconstruction conference in Damascus. Research that presents approaches to housing in Damascus and the absence of spatial justice](#)

x [Omran Abu Mohsen, Syrian journalist, Equal Citizenship Centre, 2018.](#)

mausoleum, represented by poor quality housing that deprives them of any privacy, the absence of basic services, and the deteriorating economic situation which affects their physical and mental health, dreams, and aspirations. Here, Abu Mohsen proceeds to link social and spatial justice and its intersections with gender and class, and demonstrates through anecdotal evidence and stories how women from different backgrounds and places deal with the lack of spatial, social, and economic justice in times of war.

Everyone, wherever they may be, has the right to enjoy equally the rights of place, such as housing, freedom of movement, and access to and use of resources, intersecting naturally with the concept of justice of place that we write about here. However, the concept of justice of place proposed here differs in several aspects from ones previously put forth. We are talking about women who have been forcibly removed from their places of origin under traumatic circumstances such as bombing, besiegement, and the fear of prosecution by government authorities, and forced to move to other ones instead. This creates a dynamic in which there is a place where people were forcibly displaced from on the one hand, and another place where they were forcibly placed in on the other. Between these two ends of the forced displacement-placement spectrum, people's memories, thoughts, and identities oscillate. The previous place is forbidden to them, and all that remains are the memories, both mental and photographic. Its features have changed or been effaced, and the inhabitants who shaped it no longer live in it. Their houses are either empty and abandoned, or inhabited by new people, or have disappeared entirely. It is a unique existential, psychological, and social state for a place to find itself in. What's worse are any attempts by forces of control to completely erase these places from their land, from history, and from existing altogether, transforming them into new places that have

no connection to their past.

As for the people forced to settle in new places, they will always feel like outsiders to their host countries and societies, for they were imposed on them, and they on the places.

Even if spatial justice were to be achieved through gaining rights and access to resources, the identity crises and schisms inherent to the conditions of forced displacement would not go away, with people never really able to embody a full sense of belonging. While neoliberal policies and the culture of globalisation wants to make us believe that humans are becoming more and more mobile and therefore increasingly adaptable to living anywhere and gaining a sense of home outside of their places of origin, they conveniently deny the experiences of those for whom moving and settling in a foreign land is not a choice but rather a mode of survival. Forced displacement by definition strips the displaced person of the agency to choose what their place is and what they call “my house”, “my home,” or “my country,”. Amongst the groups who were subjected to the harshest experiences imaginable and “uprooted” from their places, as described by many of the women in this book, nothing can make them forget, ignore, or move on from the entire life they were forced to leave and the many places from which they were torn apart. And no one should force them to rebuild their belonging to the new places. Moreover, there should not be any policy or any reason forcing them to do so. In his paper “Rethinking the Dialogue on People, Place, Identity and Displacement,” Gaim Kibreab expresses the importance and depth of the relationship between people’s identities and the places from which they leave: ^{xi}

xi Kibreab, G. (1999). Revisiting the debate on people, place, identity, and displacement. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 12(4), 384–410. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/12.4.384>

“The relationship between place and identity, not in terms of the connection between people and soil, per se, but in terms of a state occupying a particular land and having the right to exclude others from that land or property, is important. People tend to identify strongly with their territories because of the opportunity they have regarding rights of access to resources and protection by virtue of being members or citizens of that territory. People identify themselves with areas where their entitlements stem from belonging to a community that occupies a geographically defined physical space. ^{xii} ”

Indeed, there are certain entitlements such as belonging, claiming rights or changes in place, building, establishing, and owning homes and lands so that they get passed on to future generations, or even the entitlement to choose a cemetery, or family cemetery in which to be buried and other intimate and important matters that displaced people are unable to access in their new places of settlement, or may never indeed obtain, even if they were to one day return to their homes.

Therefore, the concept of ‘Justice of the Place’ shows the depth of the crime of excluding people from their places and lands, displacing them, or forcing them to leave those places and preventing them from ever returning. It also demonstrates the difficulty and complexity of the concept of justice in relation to this crime and the importance therefore of writing and sharing the experience of being subjected to force displacement in order to define what justice they wish to achieve and ultimately achieve it.

“I often try to talk about Syria and Darayya and describe the house to my two children, but that is not enough. I feel that if they do not go and see with their own eyes what I tell them, part of their identity will be erased.

What's worse, I cannot guarantee that if they return, they will find the place as I had described it to them, as there are systematic plans to build residential complexes by Iranian companies." (Sumaya Al-Khawlani, Darayya).

"My children and I hate new houses; we no longer want a new house... I wish my children could see the house where I grew up. I want to go back to that place; nothing can replace that feeling. I am grateful for many of the cities I lived in after displacement, but they are all temporary connections with no history attached to them." (Fayrouz, Madaya)

"I don't know if justice can be served. I want to hug my father, to sit with him next to my mother's grave and exchange conversations with her, as we used to do back in 2012. We would take tea to her grave with three cups, as she used to loved tea. Can this be achieved? I want the Syrian regime to be held accountable for every drop of blood that was shed and for every tear that my son and I cried... Can this be achieved?" (Nisreen Al-Abdullah, Al-Zabadani)

"Justice cannot be served through the channels we know. What is justice? Even if the head of the regime and everyone by his side are held accountable, this does would not make up for a single day of torment that we lived through, for the prisoners we lost, the homes that were destroyed and the souls that were lost along with them. I seek accountability, but I do not believe or trust that international courts can serve any kind of justice. Maybe the real justice is heavenly justice. Who will compensate my daily anxiety about being let down, displaced, or expelled? I am in fear every day that I will wake up and the owner of the house will come to take me and my family out, or that we will be deported." (Shuaa Alamal, Al-Zabadani)

Methodology

The recounting of personal stories in contexts of war and conflict and then translating them into written documentation is a process that has its own specificity and sensitivity, independent to and different from analytical research and report writing. We therefore gave a lot of thought to how best to approach the methodology behind this book, researching similar works and consulting with a number of specialists before designing and implementing our own. Upon completion of the book, it is clear that our choice of methodology was largely successful and appropriate considering the initial vision, the type of documentation, and the content we produced in direct collaboration with the women narrators. We will therefore share this methodology here so that those who work in documenting and producing oral history in similar contexts of war and conflict where crimes and all forms of violations take place and must be accounted for can benefit from it. We will also point to some lessons learned along the way that we will be sure to implement in the future when working on similar projects related to knowledge production.

To begin with, we will explain why we chose women from the rural outskirts of Damascus to share their harrowing experiences with us and narrate their stories from the start of the war. We will then explain how we communicated with the participating women and how we built the methodology specifically for the purpose of this book.

Why Did we Choose Women who were Displaced from Areas of Rural Damascus?

It is important to point out that the work done by Women Now to shed light on the crime of forced displacement in Syria and document it did not begin with this book. In 2019, the team at Women Now conducted a pilot project entitled “Feminist Discussions on Forced Displacement” with twenty-one displaced Syrian women residing in North-Western Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, and Europe. Based on the results of these discussions, which included the needs and demands of the participating displaced women, another project was later designed and implemented in 2020 in cooperation with PAX for Peace, aiming to provide displaced women with the knowledge and tools needed to defend their rights and those of their communities. This project resulted in a position paper entitled “ A Position Paper on the Views of Forcibly Displaced Syrian Women on their Situation, Rights, and Demands. ^{xiii} ” Throughout this project, many women shared their stories, how they were displaced, how the crime of forced displacement affected them, their families, and every detail of daily life from the start of the war through to today, as well as their fears that these places and their history would be erased forever and that they would lose their rights of ownership and of return.

This participation made us more confident about the importance of documenting these stories as a tool for preserving memory and resisting injustice, and in honour of those lives and places that were stolen from their people in the most horrific and inhumane ways. It was also a creative way to achieve a level of justice for women and the places they lost.

xiii To view this paper and learn more about the project, you can read the paper in Arabic and English on the Women Now website. https://women-now.org/ar/position-paper-on-perspectives-of-forced-displaced-syrian-women-on-their-conditionsrightsand-demands_ar-pdf/

As a first step in beginning to document the narratives of displaced women, we held several meetings with the group that participated in the aforementioned project in order to gauge their opinion on the idea of producing a series of books, each of which includes a set of stories told by women about the various contexts of their respective displacement. Our initial plan was to follow a sequential timeline of the mass displacements that occurred in the different regions across Syria since 2011. We quickly learned that the issue was more complicated than initially imagined. During the meetings, women suggested that each book include a particular region in Syria, so that women from different regions would be represented and would have the right to recount the details and explain the contexts of their own experiences, rather than producing a sequential timeline of various displacement contexts from several regions in Syria within one book. They strongly felt that recounting and documenting the individual and collective memories and experiences of displacement of women from different regions was more important than focussing on a chronological timeline of events.

Given the sensitivity of this issue and its heavy impact on the women who lived through the war and who are still suffering the repercussions of the traumas they experienced, we communicated with women who had prior knowledge of our organisation and our team and would therefore trust enough to confide in us with their stories. Therefore, the area of rural Damascus was chosen as the region to be covered for the first book. The Women Now team worked in some areas of Eastern Ghouta specifically by establishing centres that remained until they were bombed by the Syrian regime and its allies, and the entire team was displaced from it in 2018. Our Women Now team colleague, Malak Khabiye^{xiv}, was martyred there.

xiv [Malak Khabiye^{xiv} \(29 years old\) was killed in a Russian air strike on this day three years ago. Malak was working in one of the “Women Now for Development” centres in the besieged part of Eastern Ghouta. We still feel the shock and sorrow in our hearts. We will remember Malak as if she had never left us.](#)

After choosing to begin with the region of rural Damascus and having communicated with a group of displaced women from different areas there, we found that each region had suffered from different phases of displacement and exodus for different reasons; bombings, raids, massacres, and the so-called “reconciliation agreements,” or as Warda Yassin called them, displacement agreements ^{xv} between the Syrian government, its allies, and opposition armed groups ^{xvi} and for varying periods of time, dating from 2012 until 2018. After the women narrated their stories, we found that these personal experiences, full of places, feelings, tragedies, and hopes, are all stories that deserve to be told in more than one book, so that each one can claim its own space. Concurrently, this would also allow readers to learn about and better understand the context of each region, the differences and similarities between them, and the various events, crimes, and violations that women suffered both individually and collectively in either one or more regions. ^{xvii}

We chose the Madaya, Zabadani, and Darayya regions for the purpose of this book for more technical and communication-related reasons rather than strategic. There are a total of six stories from these three regions, and given the depth with which the women recounted their in-

xv [Warda Al-Yassin, article entitled “Forcible displacement, the massive Syrian tragedy”, Syrian Women’s Political Movement. \(In Arabic\).](#)

xvi The Syrian government has increasingly relied on local agreements as one of its primary strategies aimed at forcing the opposition to surrender. The government and its allies present these agreements as “reconciliation” efforts, but they come after a prolonged illegal siege and bombing operations, and in any case lead not only to the evacuation of members of informal armed groups, but also to the mass displacement of civilians. In essence, these agreements enabled the government to regain control of territory by starving out and then evicting inhabitants that rejected its rule. The now-famous green bus inhabitants eviction operations have become a symbol of dispossession and defeat.

This explanation of the so-called “reconciliation agreements” is taken from the Amnesty International report, [“We either leave or we die: Forced displacement under the “reconciliation” agreements in Syria.” 2017.](#)

xvii By mass displacement we mean: Residents of the areas being forced to leave their homes and places as a result of violence, such as bombing, arrests, raids, or massacres, or because of the agreements mentioned above. Forced displacement through what are called “reconciliation agreements” may be the clearest form of groups of people being displaced together from their places to other places, but other reasons for displacement will also be called collective displacement, even if they include individual displacement and displacement of a person or families. The situation here is collective, that is, we read the story of one woman about her displacement due to bombing, for example, but at the same time there are tens or hundreds of families and individuals from the same area who were forced to do the same thing.

dividual stories, they are sufficient to paint a substantive picture of what the overall context for women caught up in the midst of the war would have been like. We spoke with the women displaced from these areas in a storytelling interview format, and then proceeded to transcribe them. From a geographical standpoint, the regions of Madaya and Zabadani are related. Madaya is a Syrian town and district affiliated with the Zabadani region in the Damascus Countryside Governorate and both are located northwest of Damascus on the eastern foot of the East Lebanon Mountain Range. The residents of these areas suffered considerably throughout the revolution and war, facing multiple displacements and besiegement, and ending with the crime of forced displacement with the exchange that took place between the besieged areas of Madaya and Zabadani and the besieged area of Kafriya and Al-Fu'a in the Idlib countryside. This agreement was made by the Syrian regime and Iran and "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham" according to the "Four Cities Agreement" of 2017.^{xviii}

As for Darayya, it is located west of the capital, Damascus, making it geographically further from the regions of Madaya and Zabadani. Its inhabitants have been exposed to all kinds of injustice, oppression, and crimes, from besiegement, arrests, killing, massacres, and Syrian regime bombardment, ending with the crime of forced displacement in 2016 which transferred most of those who had remained after the siege of

xviii At the beginning of April 2017, the "Four Cities Agreement" - in its amended version - was signed between representatives of some opposition factions on the one hand and Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, on the other hand, with the cover of the Syrian regime in isolation from the United Nations, which was present in the first agreement. The amended version ignored the commitments of the Syrian regime and Iran from the first version to release a large number of detainees (1,500 detainees) and not force the inhabitants of the region to leave their homes. This agreement resulted in the forced displacement of a large number of residents of the Zabadani area, including inhabitants of the cities of Zabadani, Madaya and Bukain. On the other hand, the inhabitants of the towns of Kafriya and Al-Fu'a, which are located within areas controlled by Free Army factions, were displaced. Iran, the country directly involved in the crime of displacement alongside the regime, was also keen to include other cities and towns in the agreement in the north and south of the country. This explanation of the Four Cities Agreement is excerpted from an article by the Syrian Association for Citizen Dignity entitled "[The Displacement of Madaya and Zabadani, Compound Crime and the Horizon of Return](#)," 2021. (In Arabic)

Darayya to northern Syria.^{xix} The research team at Women Now, initially worried about how to justify the selection of these regions, but after producing the stories and working on them, we found that the importance does not lie at all in the choice of the regions, but rather in continuing and producing books that include the stories of women from all the regions mentioned previously and with a methodology that ensures that every woman from every region has the right to tell their story in full and that we can produce these stories with honesty and passion.

Communication with Displaced Syrian Women

It was very important for us to communicate with Syrian women forcibly displaced from their homes in the Damascus countryside since 2011 with whom we have previous mutual relationships and who trust us as a team, an organisation, and the person interviewing them. Our insistence on this method of communication is so that the participant can feel a sense of security and comfort while sharing her story, as she knows who she is dealing with and trusts the team to the point where she feels understood and comfortable to talk freely, as opposed to feeling alienated and not at ease were she talking to a stranger with no previous knowledge of her situation. Based on our research experience in contexts of war and conflict, personal stories contain an ocean of sensitive and painful details, feelings, and memories that add richness to the story and give it depth and value. These are details and feelings that will likely not be shared by the women interlocutors unless they feel confident and comfortable with the researcher and the research team. This sense of trust and security during the participatory process is the right of every woman who chooses to share her story and personal experience

^{xix} On August 26th and 27th, 2016, all remaining inhabitants of the city of Darayya, estimated to number between 2,500 and 4,000 people, were evacuated according to a local agreement between the Syrian government and a committee representing civilians and fighters in Darayya. The agreement only provided one option, whether for armed groups or civilians, which was to leave the city to Idlib, which is controlled by the armed opposition, or to a government evacuation centre near Damascus.

This explanation of the displacement of the people of Darayya is excerpted from Amnesty International's report "[We either leave or we die: Forced displacement under the 'reconciliation' agreements in Syria](#)" 2017.

ence, and must be taken into consideration during all types of feminist knowledge production that rely on oral storytelling as a primary source of knowledge amalgamation. Of course, some women will be more familiar than others with our organisation, our team, and the work that we do, while some may have no prior knowledge whatsoever. Nevertheless, it is a central part of our research ethics, and part in parcel of feminist research ethics, to ensure our participants are fully briefed on who we are and are invited to participate in introductory workshops and meetings where they can have any and all questions answered before the interviews begin.

Introductory Stage

Given the sensitivity of the memories recounted and the significant impact reliving them has on the narrators, we worked on designing a preliminary stage before embarking on the oral history interviews. This stage began with a meeting with the women to explain the details of the project, its goals, and vision, all the while taking in their opinions at each stage and implementing their suggestions accordingly.

The next stage constituted a group workshop called “Memory Recall” which lasted for a period of four days. Due to the large number of participants, we conducted this workshop with two groups over the course of two separate sessions, the first in June 2022 and the second in August of the same year. Both workshops were presented and facilitated by Dr. Nora Amin, a specialist in the field of feminist studies.^{xx}

xx Dr. Nora Amin (Egypt/Germany)

An author, actress, choreographer, and theatre director, in addition to her academic and research work. She founded Lamusica Independent Theatre Group in Egypt where she choreographed, directed, and produced 50 pieces of dance, theatre, and music. In 2011, she founded the Egyptian Project for the Theatre of the Oppressed and its Arab network (Morocco, Lebanon, and Sudan). She is a visiting professor in Theatre and Dance Studies at German universities and holds a doctorate in Cultural Policy from Hildesheim University. Playwright and actress with the German group “Nas Al-Markab” since 2019, which won the State Award for Best Theatre for the year 2019. So far, she has published 24 books in the fields of novels, poetry, theatre, short stories, cultural studies, and translation. Her most recent book, published in Arabic and German, is “Dance of the Persecuted,” about the history of belly dancing in Egypt from a feminist perspective that opposes the commodification of the body and

In each of the two workshops, Dr. Amin followed a methodology that she had previously used in a number of workshops with survivors of similar contexts of war and conflict, with a few modifications adapted to the particular experiences of Syrian women in the Syrian war. This methodology is based on the idea of distancing, so that disclosures do not appear as if they were internal and intimate confessions, but rather become an exercise in remembering that is done out of adherence to identity, and out of recognition of methods of narration, exchange, solidarity, and psychological support.

Dr. Amin relied on exercises from the “Theatre of the Oppressed”, which are extracted from popular exercises and simplified to allow for the creation of a group work structure and distance the group from the dangers of monopolising time, with the goal of creating a natural space for equality and balance within the group. These initial exercises sought to stir the participants’ memory, by instigating them, for instance, to recall their first memory associated with the mother figure, or to recall the last memory associated in our minds with the place or house in which they grew up, or to recall a memory associated with their bodies and the movement of their feet post displacement. She then moved systematically from these to exercises that depend on Free Association, a technique that calls for automatic and immediate reactions, without prior thinking or planning what to say.

She then conducted a more in-depth, sensitive training based on meanings and how they are created according to the experience and expertise of each of the participants. This was a vital opportunity to realise the

its enslavement by the patriarchal and capitalist system. It was preceded by “Migrating the Feminine” in three languages, about the violation of the female body as a political weapon, and it is the work that comes at the end of a long series of her feminist studies and published books on human rights and social and cultural justice. Founding member of the Dance Centre in Berlin, supervisor of the emerging groups in the national “Flausen” program since 2018, expert and mentor at the Independent Performing Arts Union in Berlin since 2020, member of the Board of Trustees of the German Centre for the International Theatre Institute since 2021, and a member of the Scientific Council of the Barba Varley Foundation and Performing Tangier Festival.

transformation of meanings according to the path of each woman's life and journey. The participants reacted well during these exercises, offering a variety of answers, some similar while others more contradictory, thus paving the way for a wide spectrum of pluralism of experience and individual expertise among different members of the group.

Dr. Amin describes this stage as such: "This diversity helped us understand the infinite interpretation of the experience of displacement and war, how the sum of responses among the participants suggests a balance between pain and hope, and that expression is in itself an opportunity to be visible and to heal together through sharing and embracing the experience, no matter its pain."

As for dealing with memory, Dr. Amin explained the different stages of memory flow, the nature of the first revelation, the pain it may evoke, and the manifestation of buried memories into verbal expressions. She also emphasised that in such workshops it is inevitable that participants will come face to face with their pain, but do so in a safe context and within a group capable of understanding, supporting, and showing empathy and compassion.

In other areas, Dr. Amin resorted to presenting the importance of the senses, especially the non-central senses such as smell, as opposed to the central sense of sight. This proposal led to the opening of a mine of olfactory memories that recreated their lost place and the vocabulary associated to it through the sense of smell, providing a silver lining amongst the darkness of such painful memories. This exercise pointed to the power of scent in memory recollection, whereby remembering the smell of local plants, oranges, mint and thyme, and flowers such as jasmine, etc., creates a layer of poeticism even when speaking about destruction and loss.

This is in fact what we read in between the lines of each woman's narrative. We will find them describing the scents of beloved places, the types of trees and plants that decorated their homes and the smells that formed parts of their memories, identities, and relationships with places and people.

Dr. Amin says: "When the exercises are dealt with collectively, the responses form a large pool of words and vocabulary that seem to support each other and create another kind of balance between pain and healing. Thus, narration manifests itself through the exercises as a planned and organised act, but it does not present a complete narrative, and this is precisely the technique that I resort to in order to postpone the confrontation with pain and develop a path that allows it to be contained when it occurs at the end of the workshop."

To expand the scope and importance of the concept of narration, on the last day of each workshop, Dr. Amin read the personal stories of women survivors of the civil war in Sudan with whom she had previously worked in a workshop entitled "From the Inside Out." Describing the purpose of these readings, Dr. Amin says: "The goal was to expand the concept of storytelling and to identify dimensions and areas of storytelling outside the borders of the Syrian experience, but which would clarify the common thread among women in wars. It was also an opportunity to explain the structure of the narrative and how the novel emerged from memory and turned first into a gesture, then a movement, and then a verbal expression, and how the author of the story is its writer, while my role is merely to support the expression, then write and create a structure for the novel. The story was a source of pain for some, but for others it was a motivation to tell, to continue, and to realise the importance of completing the next stage of the novel and writing with Salma, the researcher."

In the final part of the workshop, Dr. Amin moved on to recreating and reconstructing the place through personal narratives. To achieve this, she used the technique of free association with the names of cities, regions, and places, writing them down, then recalling those places and pronouncing a memory from them or a meaning associated with them. They created from memory a memory map that is, as Dr. Amin puts it, a form of “poetic justice” for the participant women.

The workshops had an impact that could easily be described as magical for the participating women. As they progressed from stage to stage, their enthusiasm increased accordingly, as did their sense of importance in what they were doing as an act of resistance and seeking justice on their terms. They began preparing for their interviews and asking their colleagues who conducted the interviews about the subject matter so that they could be prepared. In addition, these workshops created an invaluable bond between them, a bond of shared experience, endless solidarity, and collective support for one another. They consoled each other, laughed and cried together, reminisced over places they knew, shared their memories, and felt a sense of belonging to a group or small community that they had lost a long time ago as a result of displacement, homelessness, and the loss of supportive social circles.

As they told their stories, the impact these workshops had on them became increasingly clear. They overflowed with emotions as they listened to questions about their homes and the places they lost, describing the houses and the streets, describing themselves in those places and their feelings, talking about themes of identity, belonging, justice, pain, and hope. They were comfortable with the method of narration despite the grim reality of those memories and lived events, full of stories of oppression, material and moral loss, fear, nostalgia, and an acute sense of injustice and unfairness.

Sharing the Opinion of a Specialist in Urban Anthropology from a Feminist Perspective

From the inception of this project, specifically during the design phase, we read extensively about feminist geopolitics as “an analytical approach that links seemingly disparate people, places, events, and issues, to show the connections across the different processes of power and forces that produce inequality and exploitation.”^{xxi} We looked for a specialist in this field who was also familiar with the field of urban planning particularly in contexts of war and conflict in Syria and neighbouring areas, from which many have suffered forced displacement and have been made to resettle elsewhere. We wanted to expand our horizons in how places are read and designed, people’s relationships with them, and the gender-specific differences between these relationships in order to show a deeper dimension to the nature of the affiliations to places, and a greater understanding of social and political contexts from a gender perspective.

Indeed, one of the specialists who met all the above requirements in addition to having himself been forcibly displaced from Syria, is our colleague and architect Anas Tallo.^{xxii} Anas was able to expand the horizons of the work at hand through his past experience researching places in Syria, women’s relationship with them and their particular gender-specific positionalities, and how the violation of forced displacement impacts them and their lives differently.

xxi Massaro, V. A., & Williams, J. (2013). Feminist geopolitics. *Geography Compass*, 7(8), 567–577. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12054>

xxii A Syrian activist, he holds a degree in architecture from the University of Damascus and a master’s degree in “Urban Socio-Anthropology” from the Lebanese University. He works as director of advocacy and campaigns at the Women Now Organisation for Development, a trainer contracted with the Ahil Foundation for Community Planning and writes for the Raseef 22 website. His training revolves around the concept of citizenship and its issues, the concept of transitional justice and its mechanisms and the practices of community organisation and public story telling.

Anas says, "Places in Syrian society, if read from a feminist approach, exclude a sense of privacy." The boundaries of the majority of Syrian women have always been limited to the private sphere, and have not extended to reach public spaces, making women's relationship with the private linked to the home and family a special relationship that deserves to be studied on several levels and during different periods, especially in times of conflict, contributing to the transformation of women's gender roles and the transformation of the type of relationship they have with the private and public spheres respectively, adding a deeper understanding when studying this relationship."

Through his vantage point of the different relationships between women and men and private spaces, such as the home and their surrounding neighbourhoods, as well as with public spaces, such as workplaces, squares, streets, etc., Anas emphasised to us the importance of women describing in their personal narratives their places, their detailed relationship with them and their feelings towards them, which should not always be dominated by joy and love. It can also be overcome by limitations and oppression.

In addition, Anas referred to the concept of the intangible memory of places, which goes beyond the memory of walls, rooms, floors, streets, and corners to the sensory memory between them and women, formed cumulatively over the course of several days, or as many women called it, "the spirit of the place." In this, Anas explains this concept, saying:

"A place cannot be reduced to a physical space only, as place is both a tangible and intangible space at the same time. Its physical form is revealed by the architecture of the place and its built elements, and its intangible form expresses the symbolic repercussions of the material elements on the person present inside it, and the psychological and social repercussions that make the person's communication with this place a sensory

communication that develops and changes at any given moment. The stock of these accumulated communications is archived in the memory of the person communicating with this place to form, in both its material and immaterial aspects, an authentic memory of the place in multiple human memories. The tangible form of a place may change, or even disappear, or we may simply leave it, but its intangible reflections remain seared in our memory. The memory of a place is a pure memory. It cannot be classified as a positive or negative memory, sad or happy, or any other characteristics except through the individual, because it is the individual who possesses the feeling related to the memory of the place and, therefore, they are the only one who can determine what the effects of that memory will be.”

Continuous Psychological Support and Care During Work

From the planning stage of this project, we allocated a financial budget for psychological support and care for the participating women. This type of psychological support and protection has become an approach we follow consistently at Women Now and in particular at our Feminist Research Department, especially when the knowledge produced is based on stories, narratives, and personal experiences of violations, loss, trauma, or any experience that has a profound impact on the human psyche. From an ethical standpoint, we cannot open the doors to memory recollection or heal deep psychological wounds and then leave them with their owners without offering any support or protection. Most of the women who narrated their experiences of displacement, besiegement, and all the worst cases of violence during war, never received any kind of psychological support or treatment, or even simply an opportunity to release their traumas, share their feelings, thoughts, and stories, and be listened to. Even for those who did receive psychological

support in one form or another, it was never easy for them to recall all the painful details about what happened to them throughout the war, the loved ones they lost, the places, dreams, and hopes they left behind, their physical and psychological fatigue, and their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. They never opened up with anyone because they always had to appear strong for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Psychotherapist Dr. Aziza Mahmoud Ali was with them from the time they started working until after they completed their autobiographical interviews.^{xxiii} Some women at first resisted having individual sessions with the specialist. They were afraid of suffering fatigue and were surprised at their ability to divulge what they had suppressed over the years. But the interaction and solidarity that occurred in the group sessions and the comfort they felt with the specialist in fact encouraged most of the women to go ahead with the individual sessions, with some of them even asking to have additional ones. Dr. Ali was able to effectively form what is known as a safe space, and to hear and support women using methods she had developed throughout her long and rich career, not only in the Syrian context, but also in contexts of conflict and wars in other Arabic-speaking or Arab-majority countries. She also provided emotional and expert support to our research team, listened to the stories, read over the transcripts, and contributed with advice and suggestions.

xxiii Dr. Aziza Mahmoud Ali is a psychological therapist for individuals and groups specialising in trauma and a psychosocial supporter for survivors of crises and disasters. She holds a PhD from USIM Malaysia in the field of EMDR therapy.

Participation of Women Narrators in Revising and Modifying their Stories

After completing the interviews, our team typeset them in the first-person voice and in colloquial Arabic, from which they were re-written in Modern Standard Arabic to make them more suitable for publication in book form. The content was not revised, though some changes to formatting and style were made. Sometimes the narrator completes a piece of information or a story that she started at the beginning of her speech at the end, or the narrator adds something at the end of the interview that she had previously forgotten. In these cases, we sought to rearrange the timeline of events to make it easier for readers to follow, though at times we left the events chronologically overlapping or condensed as they were, because they represented the reality of how such moments were lived, as a smooth chronological sequence of events is not something available in life under siege, bombardment, death, and displacement. While reading and writing, we drew the path of displacement for each of the women, from 2011 until the date of the interview, with the timeline specified at the end of each story.

After that, I sent each of the six stories to the owners so that they could read them and answer some of the questions I had written, confirm some of the dates and events mentioned, and add, modify, or delete what they wanted. Their response was truly phenomenal. Despite being overwhelmed with daily preoccupations; they answered all the questions posed and were able to verify any gaps in memory with people who had lived those moments with them. They shared pictures of the homes they were forced to leave behind and their loved ones who died or were still languishing in Syrian regime prisons. They reviewed the timeline of their displacement and modified any inaccurate or filled in any missing information. They then approved the publication of the final version of the story after their edits had been incorporated.

Visual Additions that Embody Aspects of Women's Memories

During research and narrative interviews, we asked the women narrators if they would like to share photos of their places in the areas from which they were displaced, such as pictures of their houses, farms, plants, neighbourhoods, or any other place they loved. Some women reacted to this request positively and with joy, as being able to share these pictures meant a lot to them. They thought putting these pictures in a book would revive those places and make them present in public spaces, and not just hidden in their drawers or stored in their private memories. Indeed, some of them, as you will find in their personal narratives, shared pictures of their loved ones who either died or were detained, considering it an act that would contribute to their constant attempts of commemorating their memory and demanding the freedom of those forcibly disappeared among them. Some women also shared pictures of their current places, to reflect their attempts at belonging to these places or to show the reflection of their identities in photographic details.

However, some participants refrained from sharing photos that could pose a risk for family members who remained in Syria for fear it might expose them and lead to them being questioned or pursued by the Syrian regime's security forces. Some of them even asked that the narration not disclose the exact locations of places mention so as to avoid exposing their real identities.

We also added abstract drawings that creatively embody some of the situations that women described in their stories to reflect their depth, including joy, sorrow, fear, strength, or other emotions.

The artist "Noah"^{xxiv} drew these abstract drawings, read each story sepa-

xxiv Noah, a designer, and art director with a great passion for narrative and stories. He expresses these stories in different ways, whether abstract or technical drawings, through animated films, designs, and pictures, using artistic or technical methods that help him convey the story to the recipient.

rately, and proceeded to discuss his ideas with us and the research team to decide collectively what scenes he would draw. He then designed a set of preliminary drawings of these scenes and shared them with us so that we could comment on their specifics or enrich them with details of the contexts in which they occurred and give us his artistic point of view. After agreeing on the final version, he completed the drawings and we would move on to the next story, and so on. Noah's interaction, his accurate perception, and artistic abilities had the greatest impact on this process being completed smoothly and professionally. Indeed, this stage, with all its details, had an additional impact on the work in general through the in-depth discussions that we had, through the opinions that Noah shared with us as an artist and a Syrian, and the wonderful works he produced for this book.

Challenges and Limitations

It seems that the ambition to produce knowledge in the context of war and conflict should not be a long-term objective. This book took two years to complete, which may be a very acceptable period for knowledge production, but the harsh circumstances in which the women telling their stories live in make them always vulnerable to danger, movement, loss of communication, or even death. In collaborative projects such as this one, communication with women must be continuous until it is completed, and continue even after the completion of its production, in activities such as campaigns and meetings aimed at promoting the work and its content. Therefore, the biggest challenge was the research team's ability to continue to communicate with the Syrian women who were vital to producing this book.

We will mention some examples of the difficulty of doing research work in conditions of conflict and displacement and the harshness of life for women therein, especially in the long-term. Twelve of the women par-

ticipants who narrated their stories lived through and witnessed the earthquake that struck Northwest Syria and Southern Turkey in February 2023. They left their rented homes, as some of which started to crack, and others got completely destroyed. Some of them lived in tents for months until they found another place to move to, or until they and their families could afford to renovate a house that required a lot of money to make it habitable. We lost contact in the first two weeks after the earthquake with Nisreen Al-Abdullah from Zabadani, who was displaced to Northern Syria. We had no idea whether she was dead or alive until a colleague found her and reassured us of her safety. Her house had been destroyed, she was living in a tent, and found her in a state of severe psychological hardship when we were finally able to reach her. It was unethical to ask her to review the story of her displacement while she was dusting herself off from the earthquake with tired hands.

Fayrouz, who lives in Turkey now after she was displaced from Madaya to Northern Syria was forced to vacate her home, and when she returned to it, the landlord evicted her and her family, so she spent more than two months searching for alternative housing.

Fortunately, through the financial and psychological response of Women Now to mitigate the effects of the earthquake on the team and the participants, we were able to secure some financial support and hold group support sessions for the participants who had been exposed to the earthquake in those areas, which continued for months after this disaster.

Another example of the challenges we faced throughout the process was that we had to do all the narrative interviews in the same year. Perhaps this is a good idea in that we already have all the stories and will publish them sequentially, but what happens if we were to lose contact with the women who wrote the stories over the coming years? How will they re-

view and edit their stories and confirm their approval to publish them in the final version? This is the same question we asked when we thought about interviewing displaced women from one, two, or three regions every year. What if we cannot communicate with other women in the coming years? What if something happens to them or we lose contact with them for some reason? Questions that we cannot answer as long as we are all displaced Syrians in various countries and living in a state of instability, fear, and anxiety about the unknown that has no end in sight yet.

As for limitations, it was painful for us to conduct interviews with women in Syria, Turkey, and Europe via the Internet. It was painful that we could not see each other's tears or hold each other, that we could not drink coffee together or laugh together while telling the stories. We were only able to conduct live interviews with women in Lebanon. We got to know Al-Dimashqiya, Shuaa Alamal, and eight women whose stories we will publish in subsequent books. We were very happy not to be talking to each other behind screens. It is certain that physical communication during a narrative interview is not sufficient either. If we had all been in one place, meeting every once in a while, developing our ideas, getting to know one another, and having enough time to listen, write, and develop, the form and type of knowledge produced would certainly be different, but this is the reality we are living and the outcome is something we have to contend with as being a part of what displacement forces upon us.

Of course, all the challenges and limitations referred to are lessons learned from this experience, which will help us greatly when designing a methodology for subsequent narrative work or knowledge production with women or individuals who are still living in harsh and unstable contexts.

What Can we Build on Following this Work?

This book has its own special value on feminist, legal, and political levels in the Syrian context. It is a documentation of events that occurred in the lives of Syrian women who were displaced and subjected to endless and different forms of violations over specific periods of time that no one else could have recorded. It is the reflection of a true history and a much-needed alternative to what dictators and their allies write and say about what happened to groups and individuals, especially women, in certain areas of Syria. It is a spoken description of a narrative borne straight out of the memories of those who lived it. Of course, these personal stories alone do not constitute complete, exhaustive documentation to be used for eventual processes of accountability and justice. But it is a start, and many more like them must be produced in different ways, written, narrated, audible, and visual.

The content of this book and subsequent books are rich and important materials for oral and written history in the field of human rights, gender, urban studies, feminist geopolitics, and justice from the perspective of the women concerned. In each story, many themes and topics emerge that are worth delving into and analysing. We will mention some of them here and leave room for readers to imagine others.

In each story, in a different way, the woman's relationship with her place and her position in it emerges, as does the difference in this relationship according to the place and circumstances. All of this is reflected in the woman's sense of belonging to the place and society and in her changing identities, at times chosen and at others imposed. It also sheds light on how they interact and adapt, or not, to their changing spatial circumstances, and how their roles adapt to the roles they play at the level of the family, parents, society, or in intrapersonal relationships.

From a legal and geopolitical standpoint, most women talk about the violation of their, and their families' rights to recover home ownership and their so far fruitless attempts to recover some of them or at least ability to prove said property rights. They spoke about the Syrian government's complete destruction of some of their properties and their inability to claim them due to the forced disappearance and arrest of the owner, usually the father or husband figure, and about the Syrian government's laws that hinder any attempt for them to prove this ownership and reclaim their rights and benefits accordingly. They spoke about their hesitation and anxiety to even inquire about it through relatives for fear of arrest or persecution by Syrian regime forces, as well as many other complications that cast a heavy shadow on them as displaced women who try to persevere and rise every day in the hope of one day returning to those places. At the same time, the women would talk about the change that has taken place in their original areas in terms of new residents, evolving social relations, and the general metamorphosis of the entire place. They wonder how they would return to their places of origin, and point to the change in power relations in terms of people, the urbanisation that has taken place and its impact on them, their children, and their families.

Each story represents the character of its narrator and her reality both before and after the revolution and subsequent war, giving us an important idea about the conditions of women and the power relations built in society based on their gender and gender roles before everything changed in 2011. Their stories tell us how certain customs and traditions control their dreams and plans to study and work, how they transcended them or succumbed to them, and how they affected their lives, their pursuit of self-fulfilment, and the advancement of their families after the war. In other words, the women's stories shed light on the

societal, legal, and political roots of the challenges that Syrian women suffered prior to 2011 and how the impact of these discriminatory conditions was magnified in during war and conflict, affecting many of their endeavours, rights, and recourses to justice.

There is no one exhaustive list of topics and themes to cover when dealing with the personal stories of women during war and conflict, for there are far too many, the layers too intricate, and the contexts too varied. This book covers merely a fraction of all the stories there are to be told, and we are under no pretence to have presented a complete picture of the suffering endured at the hands of the State and its security forces, as well as the oppressive laws, customs, and traditions dictated by patriarchal systems of governance and societies. However, we are satisfied that this book serves as a starting point for Syrian women to finally have their voices heard, and for their stories, their narratives, their battles, their achievements, and their wishes be spread far and wide and read by people all over the world.

We welcome henceforth an interactive approach with the publication and dissemination of this book, whereby the stories take a life of their own and are used as a means to an end, not merely as an end unto themselves. We are looking forward to cooperating with other organisations who wish to use the anecdotes embedded within these personal narratives for future research projects, academic or journalistic work on the topic, and any other kind of advocacy actions in relation to the right to return, spatial justice, and justice of the place.

Glossary of recurrent terms in more than one story

Youth: The narrators mention the word “youth” in more than one context during their narrations of their experiences. This word has a different meaning in the context of the Syrian revolution, especially in the rebellious areas; contrary to the usual meaning, as it sometimes refers to the youth of the country who took up arms and defended it or it may be an alternative to the word “revolutionaries” or those who joined the Free Army.

Regime Army, Regime Forces: These terms refer to members of the Syrian regime’s army, security personnel or any other group that carries weapons and is affiliated with the Syrian regime.

The Free Army: This name was given at the beginning of arming of the revolution in Syria to those who defected from the Regime’s army, including soldiers and officers, and then many men and young men who took up arms and joined them.

Green buses (Green-coloured Buses): Their primary function was as public transportation buses, but “May 23rd, 2014, witnessed a new transformation in the work of green buses, when the Regime used them for the first time to displace inhabitants and besieged fighters from the old neighbourhoods of Homs to the northern countryside of Homs, after imposing a displacement agreement on them sponsored by the United Nations. Since that time, these buses have been approved as the official sponsor of all subsequent displacement operations, and they have remained a symbol of this displacement even when other types of buses were used instead.” ^{xxv}

xxv Hani Al-Abdullah, article entitled “[The Biography of the Green Bus](#)”, Al-Jumhuriya, 2021. (In Arabic)

Makeshift Checkpoint: A security or military checkpoint formed by a group of members in a place suddenly and temporarily with the aim of arresting some residents or to increase security scrutiny in an area for some reason.

Centre of the House: A term used by many Syrians to refer to the interior courtyard or space in the house, and it is particularly present in the design of most old Arab houses or rural houses.

Kashk: Syrian kashk is an ancient traditional dish made from a mixture of yogurt and bulgur or yogurt and rice. This mixture is left under the sun to dry and then is ground to become a powder.

Makdous: It is considered one of the most important traditional popular dishes in the Levant in general and in Syria in particular, and it receives great attention from all Syrian families, rich and poor alike. It is small aubergines stuffed with spicy and non-spicy red peppers, walnuts, garlic, and salt. They are arranged in glass containers of different sizes and immersed in olive oil to protect them from spoiling and so that they last for many months.

Flasheh: A word used in colloquial dialect that means flash, permanent computer memory that can be erased and reprogrammed digitally.

Al Qubaysiat: “Everyone who spoke about this topic agreed that the “Qubaysi women” existed in the early or mid-seventies of the last century, but without specifying a certain year for this emergence. Everyone also agrees that naming the group by this name goes back to the founder of this women’s group, the teacher Munira al-Qubaisi, who graduated from the University of Damascus, Faculty of Natural Sciences, and then worked as a science teacher in one of Damascus’ schools, where she was

known for her charismatic personality, intelligence and ability to influence those around her and attract them to listen to her ideas. Munira Al-Qubaisi was not satisfied with her studies of science, but she decided to continue her studies at the Faculty of Islamic Sharia at the University of Damascus. Al-Qubaisi took her religious faith, like her father and uncle before her, from Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaro, the former Mufti of Syria, and the sheikh of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in Damascus.”^{xxvi}

xxvi This explanation is excerpted from an article published on Jadaliyya website and written by Sawsan Zakzak entitled “Al-Qubaysiyyat in the Syrian Societal Context.” <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44730> (In Arabic)



Zabadani.... Madaya

Nisreen Al-Abdullah,
Fayrouz,
Al-Dimashqiya,
Shuaa Alamal

I want my name to be

Nisreen Al-Abdullah...

Story telling date: July 2022

The place and I when we were together

I am in those places

My mother, the events of 2011 and I

I left my house on the 2nd of Ramadan 2012

... and have not yet returned

Everything came back to me, except him ...

Conflicts within me, imposed identities and
identities I chose

I left my land by force and my destination
was Madaya

The siege of Madaya... waiting for the magic
wand

The day of displacement... uprooting

The journey of no return... and no destination

What happened to my house in Zabadani and
what is justice?

The path of Nisreen's displacement until the date
of telling her story

The place and I when we were together

I am 38 years old, a teacher, a mother of two children, a wife of a martyr and currently married to another man... I am from Zabadani, and I now live in Afrin.

I am from an area in Zabadani called “Qal’at al-Zahra,” which is a neighbourhood or group of alleys like the rest of them in Zabadani; where they are named after well-known families, or we call them what we want. My mother used to say, for example: “My daughter’s alley,” meaning the alley in which I live... simple as that!

There, my late husband and I built our beautiful, warm home together, step by step. We both worked and whenever we had extra money, we contributed to the house, until we completed building and finishing it together. It is a small house. At first it was two rooms with a kitchen and a bathroom. Later we built a third room when my eldest son was

born. We were trying to add something to make it a warmer and happier place. We tried to add a small garden and balcony to it and decorate it with a grapevine. In fact, I was dreaming that my home would become like my family's home...

The dearest thing to my heart in that house is the doorknob "the door handle" [crying]... I miss it so much I used it to enter my house... The first room is the guest room. It contains a carpet and a set of sofas that my family bought for me. It has a window overlooking a back lane full of trees and on the horizon is a large mountain. I used to spend most of my time at that window, when I finished work, sitting there and watching my son play. Even my late mother liked to sit there when she visited me. I also had a bedroom, oh, small and cosy [laughter]... I didn't go into it often. In fact, it was a room for sleeping only. Every morning, I left it to embrace life. As for my kitchen... Oh how I loved that kitchen! How many things I bought for it with these hands! It has a large window overlooking the main neighbourhood, where my husband's family's house and the rest of my neighbours are located opposite my house. The daily cooking period in that kitchen was an opportunity to communicate with my neighbours and have quick conversations, which we would exchange through the windows. Yes... it was possible and beautiful.



Map of the place using Google Earth in 2011



A picture of a view from one of the rooms in Nisreen's house, which she shared with us during research.

In the morning, my husband would always wake up before me, make a cup of coffee and a sandwich for our son. He knew that I liked to sleep in the morning, but do not think that I would sleep until late, no [laughter]. I would wake up at seven, drink coffee and we would quickly get dressed and take our son to his grandmother's house, me to school and my husband to work.



A picture of the view from the balcony of Nisreen's house, which she shared with us during research.

It was a very normal and ordinary life, nothing special about it, but full of comfort and stability. I finished my work and went back to my house to clean and cook, then we collected my son from his grandmother's house or my mother herself or my mother-in-law brought him home. In the evening, my husband went to meet his friends and I sat at home to read... I used to love reading very much and my nickname was "the bookworm," or I would gather with the women of the family or go to my grandmother's house, may Allah have mercy on her soul.

I am in those places

[silence]... I was the daughter of my mother and father, I was the wife of a wonderful man, I was the daughter of those streets and the tree in front of my house, the queen of my house, I was a sister and a friend... To someone who is no longer with us. Daughter of safety and stability. I am a daughter of ambition. I studied Arabic and English, and my dream was to master seven languages before I turned forty. Books were my family, and I had a large library that my late brother built for me in the ancient Greek style. I belonged to the school, to the eyes of the students, their little hands and their dreams. I belonged to my family's home, Whenever I felt stressed, I went to my mother and sat in a certain corner overlooking a river and a mountain. This corner has its magic in every season of the year and every time of the day. I stand there at sunset and watch people come down the mountain with their cars loaded with pears and apples. The view of snow in the winter from that angle soothes the soul and the breeze of the air in the summer refreshes the soul.

I used to feel at ease when I was with my father in his small car. I was always his companion, and he was trying to teach me how to drive a car before I got married. We had a lot of fun on those quick trips. To be by your father's side, pampered, protected, as if you were seven years old. Even after I got married and had children, my father did not change the way he treated me. He used to buy me what I liked and hide it in the drawer of the car until he saw me or came to my house. [Sigh]

A picture of a view from Nisreen's family's house, which she shared with us during research.



My daughter's alley

Our beautiful home

My family's home

Door handle

It has a window overlooking a back alley
full of trees

How I loved that kitchen!

How many things I bought for it with these hands!

I had a large library

I belonged to my parents' home

Whenever I felt stressed, I went to my mother and
sat in a certain corner overlooking a river and a mountain

I used to feel at ease when I was with my father in his small car

My mother, the events of 2011 and I

I was following the news of Egypt and the Egyptian people's revolution against Hosni Mubarak, moment by moment. My mother was bored because I was watching Al Jazeera TV channel to find out whether Hosni Mubarak's rule would be overthrown by the people or not. She was sick at that time, and I spent a lot of time with her. The doctors admitted her to the hospital, but we waited until March, when there was a week-long public holiday in schools between Teacher's Day and Mother's Day. My mother wanted me to be her companion and friend at the hospital. We stayed together in Al-Mujtahid Hospital in Damascus from the 13th to the 18th of March.

I remember that I met a woman there during that time and we were going down in front of the hospital to smoke together. [Laughter] She woke me up one day at 3 am saying: "Get up, Nisreen, get up." I woke up surprised that she wanted to smoke at that hour, but she said to me: "Get up... Damascus is a mess... "there is a demonstration," and we stood at the windows to watch.

At the time, I was not interested in what was happening. My mind and heart were with my mother, and I was overwhelmed with worry. I even told my husband that I would stay at my mother's side for a long time in the hospital. But when my husband came and we asked the doctor about her condition, he replied that it would be best for us to take her home... so that she could die in the warmth of her bed, among her sons and daughters. We returned to Zabadani, I used to spend all my time after school with her. A strange relationship developed between me and her, beautiful and difficult at the same time. I felt that she was my daughter, and I was her mother. She always wanted me by her side and at night

she refused to sleep because she decided to tell me all her life stories and memories that she kept to herself, all at once. She knew that her days were numbered, so she told me about her story with my father, how she met him, how she loved him, and he loved her, about her sorrow for leaving school when she was young, her learning to sew, the day I was born, the day my brother was born, and all those details. I became her mother. I left my six-year-old son to be taken care of by my sister-in-law. I forgot everything: my husband, my home and my son. I did not pay attention to what was happening in the country, nor was the idea of revolution ever on my mind. On the contrary, I was careful not to interfere in anything. Or go out during any demonstrations. I heard a lot of gossip, for example that I was afraid of losing my job and my monthly salary, so I would not participate in anything related to the revolution. The truth is that I did not care about anything during those days except for my mother's condition. My feelings about what was happening were mixed. I wanted change to happen in my country, and at the same time I saw the president as an understanding young man. I was almost certain that he would come out with a speech in which he would step down from power if the situation continued as it was in terms of demonstrations and demands. I even had my doubts about what people around me saying, "security services killed the first young man in Zabadani during one of the demonstrations. "

In August, a large group of regime forces entered Zabadani. I was in my family's house near the mountain and from the window overlooking it I saw many young men who had been in the demonstrations fleeing towards the mountain, and I saw many security forces cars heading there as well. I feared for my brother, so I sent him to my home, as most of the people in my neighbourhood were supporters of the regime and the security forces would most likely not enter homes there. ^{xxvii}

xxvii The video shows military trucks with soldiers allegedly driving through Zabadani in August 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cb_j09RhYoc
Source: Syrian Archive

After about an hour, the situation calmed down and all the security forces cars left, and we began to go out onto the street to ask each other about who had been arrested by the security forces and about what happened in general. I was surprised a little while later by two security forces cars returning and I was afraid, because usually when security forces cars were on the street, we all went into our homes for fear of arrest or any other unwanted situation. The two cars passed near me, and I saw in one of them a young man with fair skin and red hair. I did not recognise him. Nor did the women who were with me... Who is that young man? The two cars headed to the mountain; to the security checkpoint they had set up, people got out and then left after ten minutes.

This scene and what happened after changed my whole life. The next day, Umm Adnan (the mother of Adnan, in Syria they called the mothers with the name of the first male son), one of the women in the area, began searching for her son Shadi. She went everywhere and asked everyone she could about him, but no one could find him. A few days later, the shepherd who was tending sheep in the mountain came to tell people about a corpse under a fig tree. No one dared to go there where the security checkpoint was, and I believe that the mother went later to find her son Shadi dead. The security forces arrested him in the mountains, and they apparently beat him a lot; the last blow to his head was fatal. He bled and his black hair turned red, so they brought him back to the mountain, where they arrested him and dropped him there to deny any accusation, they were the perpetrators. But I and those with me saw him in their car. I have never forgotten and will never forget that scene. A few days later, his mother came to visit my mother and told her that she would go up to the mountain to bring the dirt mixed with her son's blood from under the fig tree, as this is what was left of him... [crying] After this event, I started requesting leave from school under the pre-

tence of my mother's illness, but I wanted to do so because I could no longer bear to hear what was being said between teachers who supported the regime. After I saw Shadi in the security forces car, and his grieving mother, I went out with my brother to Shadi's funeral, and I made the decision that I would be part of the revolution.

In September of the same year, security forces stormed my parents' house looking for my brother. They broke everything. They found my brother in the house. One of them looked at my mother and said: "God willing, you won't find anyone to bury you. You will no longer see your son and you will die alone." Then they took my brother. They signed her death warrant after seeing what they said to her and after seeing them arresting my brother in front of her. From then on, my mother was no longer fully conscious, and she slept most of the time. My father tried everything he could to get my brother out of detention before my mother died. He paid a lot of money and wanted to sell the house to pay for my brother freedom. My brother came out of the detention two weeks later. He had rope marks on his wrists. He sat next to my mother. She pointed to his hands, and he told her he was fine... She died two days after his release.

I decided not to mourn the death of my mother, but rather to get angry and participate in the people's revolution against this unjust regime. I accompanied my father in the funeral procession of a member of the Burhan family who had been shot dead by security forces during the silent protest staged by young people in front of a security centre in Zabadani. The protest was a response to the unjust detention of some women from the same family (e Burhan family)e security forces arrived and opened fire on the demonstrators.^{xxviii} When I went out with my

xxviii Sham News Network : Zabadani: urgent: We received the news of the martyrdom of the young man Zaher Mahmoud Burhan, 28 years old, from Zabadani, who suffered a head injury, and there are more. <https://twitter.com/ShamNetwork/status/125633541978599424>

Source: Syrian Archive

father to watch the funeral, he said to me a sentence that I will never forget: “My daughter, when the sound of bullets rise; the voice of truth is silenced.”

After that, I returned home and lived an almost normal life. I returned to teaching until December 2011, when Zabadani was stormed by a large group of regime forces. However, the youth in Zabadani were confronted with weapons and threatened to cut off water to Damascus from the Ain al-Fija area. The regime forces left Zabadani and the area was declared by the revolutionaries as an area liberated from the regime forces, but this did not last long (until February 2012), when a fierce military campaign from the regime forces entered Zabadani area.^{xxix}

xxix The regime forces attempted to storm the city in January 2012 and were met with a major response from the Free Army, during which Assad's forces suffered heavy losses in personnel and military vehicles, and the rebels blew up the first T72 tank. This forced Assad's forces to retreat. The rebels declared Zabadani the first city liberated from the regime's control and continued to do so for 15 days. However, Assad's forces mobilised reinforcements and vehicles on the outskirts of the city and prepared to bomb it from four axes, after resistance that lasted 11 days. Assad's forces were able to enter the city on February 11th, 2012, through the Madaya Plain axis. It remained there for five months with resistance and daily operations from the Free Army, which forced the last checkpoint to withdraw at the end of 2012, leaving behind a number of checkpoints stationed in its mountains. This explanation is excerpted from an article entitled “The City of Apples Revolts in the Face of Injustice,” Amna Riyad, Enab Baladi, 2014. ([In Arabic](#)).

I left my house on the 2nd of Ramadan 2012 and have not yet returned

In February 2012, regime forces stormed Zabadani area with a strong military campaign. Cars, armoured vehicles and tanks entered first Ain al-Fijah area, then Zabadani. They set up military and security forces barriers everywhere and carried out all kinds of incursions and raids. I was still in my house, and I stayed there until Ramadan (April 2012). The bombing intensified; I had never experienced that before. There are areas under the control of the regime and others that the regime cannot enter. The areas in Zabadani were divided and the bombing intensified from all directions. My father came to me on the first day of Ramadan and said: "Daughter, I want to go to Ghouta area to avoid the bombing. Do you want to go with me or stay with your husband?" I told him that I wanted to stay with my husband, and he said: "As you wish, I have entrusted you to the Lord of the Worlds and may Allah protect you for me."

The next day, women and children went in cars to Bludan area, to escape weapons and bombing, and the young men stayed in Zabadani. There are many houses in Bludan for vacationers from Damascus, Aleppo and Gulf countries. They come there only in summer and leave them vacant for the rest of the year. My uncle knew one of the owners of those houses, so he contacted him and obtained his permission to host women and children there. We spent Ramadan in that house in Bludan. It was very difficult to see my city under bombardment from the house in Bludan and I wondered: How will people in those areas that are being bombed eat?

That went on for a long time, and the clashes and bombings did not stop, so we - the women - began to insist that our husbands who remained in Zabadani find a solution: Either they come to us, or we go to them. We will not stay like this, each in a different place. Indeed, our husbands rented houses in Zabadani, as our homes were within range of bombing and cannot be returned to. My husband chose a house close to one of the regime's military checkpoints, to ensure that the house would not be bombed by them.

We stayed in that house for a short time, but the financial situation began to take a heavy toll on us. My husband and I are now unemployed, and we no longer have an income, so what should we do? We decided to move together to Bludan, and my husband was able to work and move around as his name was not yet wanted by the Syrian regime.

I asked my uncle, who was still in Zabadani, to send me his wife and my grandmother. I wanted to commemorate my mother's passing and wanted them with me. But my uncle refused and asked me and my husband to go down to Zabadani. He believed that things would end or that there would be a truce between the Syrian regime forces and the Youth in Zabadani that would take place on Eid al-Adha festival in October of that year. My husband and I were convinced, and we agreed with my uncle that we would go there on the first day of Eid al-Adha and cook there together. However, the day before Eid, the "Waqfah", a large military campaign stormed Zabadani and my uncle and many of my husband's friends were martyred. Many lives on both sides were lost.

That event had a major impact on my life. My uncle, my milk-brother, and before them my mother all died, so now what? My husband, too, could not bear the death of his three friends and decided that he would return to Zabadani and join the Youth. Indeed, we returned to Zabadani, to the house where we had lived before moving to Bludan. Here I had to

return to teaching in the government school affiliated with the regime. I had previously decided not to teach there, but circumstances forced me to return to it and it was close to the house in which I lived. I began to go to work every day routinely and pass through the checkpoints back and forth without any problems.

I got everything back, but him...

One day in November 2013, I needed to copy study materials for students at school, but I hadn't been able to as there had been a power outage all day. I went downstairs and told my husband that I needed to get the material photocopied. He replied that he would do it the following morning. I disagreed and decided to go to Bludan where there was electricity, do the photocopying, stay the night and head off to the school in the morning. And that's exactly what I did. I tried calling my husband once I arrived at the school in the morning, but his mobile phone was out of coverage. At around 10am he answered and told me: "I am in the mountains; I wish you had stayed with me yesterday. I have no clue when I'll be back!" I asked him how long he was planning to stay there, and he replied that it might be for two weeks and then he'll be back. He sent me another text on the 1st of December telling me that his stay had been significantly extended, that he might not come back anytime soon and that I should not call him again as doing so might put him in danger.

Two days later, I heard gunshots coming from the mountains during the night. I immediately called my brother to ask about what was going on. He reassured me that all was well. At that time, I was living with my sister-in-law, my martyred uncle's wife and my in-laws, all in the same house. It was a relatively stable period. We were able to go about our

business and move around. The Regime forces were aware of us and there were no issues. On the other hand, our men sometimes visited us during the night. At 1 am that night, my friend called me to ask if my husband's injury was superficial or critical. Flabbergasted, I went downstairs to find all my brothers-in-law there. I told them what my friend just told me on the phone, and they told me what she said was a joke or a rumour at best. I started going upstairs to my room only to be followed by my brother-in-law and told that my brother wanted to talk to me on the mobile.

What an absurd joke, brother. Tell me! What's up?

Your husband was martyred, sister...

La halwa wa la quowatta illa billah (there is no might or power except through Allah). Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raje'oon (we are to Allah and to Him we return) ... Hasbuna Allah wa ni'ma elwakeel (Allah is Sufficient for us! Most Excellent is He in Whom we trust)

I told my brother-in-law not to be sad as his brother will be back soon... I did not know what I was saying. My son woke up and asked me: "Did dad die?" [crying] I replied: Yes, he's dead! He told me not to cry and reminded me that his dad told us he might die and that we must not be sad.

It was hard to bring his body back home that night due to the security situation. The men asked us not to keep any lights on. I waited until sunrise, then in an admonishing tone spoke to the sun and said: "You are high up in the sky and my husband is now buried. How can I go on with my life without hearing his voice" [crying]. My husband had prom-

ised me that the revolution would end within a few months and if that was not the case, we would all go to Lebanon... What should I do now? I asked the men to send me a picture of his body to prove that he was dead. They had buried him in the mountains and asked me to forgive and pray for him. How harsh are those words!

After that shock, I became a silent and broken person. I stopped talking and decided to leave the school. In March 2014, I moved house to live with my son, grandmother and sister-in-law. I could not stay in the previous house anymore. I moved into the suburbs of Zabadani; an area called “al-Ma’mourah”. I hated Zabadani and hated everything around me. Deep down, I could not believe my husband was dead. I told everyone they were lying to me. I kept imagining hearing his keys jingling as they unlocked the door and me running to greet him. They told me I was going insane and that I should accept his death as a fact. How could I believe he was dead? I never saw his body and even the picture I was sent did not show that he was died. Yes, his eyes were closed but his face was as it is. Days later, they brought me his belongings: His mobile, bag, coat, empty water bottle, lighter; I got everything back, but him.

Struggles intensified within me; imposed identities and ones I made myself.

I became a hateful woman; a woman I didn’t recognise. Hating everything and every woman that had a living husband and father for her kids. I hated everyone who visited and gave my son money. Money for a widow and her orphaned son. I hated my mother-in-law who was constantly crying and lamenting her great loss. I hated my father-in-law for how uncanny the resemblance was between him and my late husband. I hated everyone who participated in the revolution. I hated my father. I

hated my mother who died and left me alone. I hated branding my son as an orphan. That kid who used to be happy to have his dad around and was always proud of him. My son did not comprehend that his dad had died. He was constantly asking about him, taken over by hatred like I was and now tells me that when he grows up, he will take arms and kill his dad's killer. He was affected badly by his father's death; his academic level dropped, and he denounced the title of an orphan.

I transitioned from the silent stage to resentment. I blamed my husband for dying and leaving me alone with our son. I refused to communicate with my household or eat any food; I rejected everything. I was stripped of all the titles I held: a homeowner with a family, a respectable teacher, owner of the biggest library to become a widow... Just a widow who people felt sorry for. I decided to go to Lebanon and leave everything and everyone behind, then immigrate to Europe. That was my plan. There was a place there in Lebanon owned by one of my relatives I could stay at for a couple of days. I left with my son and stayed alone in that house. I remember that one day I decided to miss a prayer; yes, me who never deliberately missed a prayer in her whole life. Once I fell asleep that night, my late husband visited me in my dreams. I was so happy to see him and told him I'd stay asleep, so we stayed together. He replied that I am a strong and kind woman, and I should wake up, accept his death and move on with my life. He also reproached me for that prayer I had missed.

I woke up the next day a different person and I asked myself: "What are you doing? How did you become this person?" I realised that the looks of pity on me and my son would not stop unless I returned to my school, my country and my people, and stood on my feet again. I decided to consider my husband a beautiful memory that I would smile about ev-

ery time it crossed my mind. I returned to Zabadani, to the Maa'moura house, to my grandmother's embrace and bread, to a land I know and love, to people who loved me and supported me even when I was hateful towards them. I spoke to my son for the first time about his father's death and told him that he would grow up to become an important man.

He would buy a red car and take his children to amusement parks and name his eldest son after his deceased father. I thought to myself that I deserve to exist, to live and to achieve my goals. I left the school run by the Syrian regime and worked in a private school. I became very interested in women who had lost their husbands and children. I wanted to help them in their ordeal, and I stood by many of them, listening to them, sharing their pain and mutually strengthening each other.

Meanwhile, in early 2015, there was a person, a former friend of my husband, who always visited us at home. He treated me differently from others. He called me "Miss Nisreen," meaning with respect. He did not give us charity money, but rather he always played with my son and supported him. They got along beautifully. He proposed to me, I agreed, and we got married. He, my son and I returned to Zabadani, to the besieged areas there. It was a mutual decision, despite the bombing and siege, we wanted to stay with the people of our country, live with them under all circumstances and help them as much as possible. It was a difficult decision. We rushed and became hopeful. We hoped that the situation would change and that a solution would soon be on the horizon... We did not expect and did not see in our worst nightmares what will happen to us, to Zabadani and its people later.

I was forced to leave my home and my destination was Madaya

We returned to Zabadani, to another house which was not my own, as my entire home was barricaded and in a very dangerous area. We stayed there for a month, under siege. It was a partial siege, meaning that food was not allowed in, but I was able to move around. I passed the checkpoints, they asked me about my destination, and I said that I wanted to bring some things from my home. The bombing was daily and from all sides, but we became accustomed to the bombing. The regime forces launched some shells at 3 pm, so we went down to the shelter until the bombing ended.

We started preparing a school. My goal was to educate children and make women's voices heard, but none of that happened. In the fifth month, a heavy military campaign came, the forces of the regime, Hezbollah and the factions of the Palestinian Popular Committees (Jibril's group).^{xxx} The Youth said that there was a jetfighter that would strike us, convoys coming from all directions, and Hezbollah vehicles. The plane hit Madaya, not us, and it flew away. The rumours continued about the number of vehicles. Some said: Twenty, thirty or fifty vehicles and a lot of tanks, I don't know how many there were. It was the month of Ramadan, my husband, my son, and I broke our fast and my son and I went to the shelter.

My husband told me that the way out of Zabadani was still accessible. I refused to leave and told him that I will share the fate of all people who

^{xxx} [video showing alleged military presence inside Zabadani on the 5th month of 2012](#)
Source: Syrian Archive.

live through the same circumstances. But the bombing intensified after three days, and the jetfighter began striking daily. It was rumoured the armoured vehicles were getting closer and closer to Zabadani. My son and I stayed in shelters for five days. They were not real shelters, but rather some basements in some buildings. We stayed in a basement that the Youth had previously prepared to be a storage space.

I remember the children's little eyes, the crying and the hunger. The ground was dirt, then the Youth put some wood so we could sit or sleep on it. There was no light, only from lighters or some candles and there was nowhere to bathe the children, and even going to the bathroom was a problem for mothers and children. After that, we started moving from one shelter to another, carrying out the orders that came to us: "Go out to such-and-such place, as the regime is now two streets away from here," so we went out. "Get out quickly, as the jetfighter will strike shortly in this area," so we rush out to a place we do not know about.

One day, my husband called and asked us to prepare quickly to leave that place. I went to the last house where my things were, and my husband came. I asked him if he would go with us, and he nodded in the affirmative. Then a missile struck near us. He covered my ears with his hands and told me to open my mouth. Then he said soon after: "I won't lie to you, I won't go out with you, I will catch up with you in two days, I have to do some things and burn the house we were in." He wanted to burn it so that our pictures, personal effects and documents did not fall into the hands of the regime and its agents. I was full of sorrow and the memory of the death of my first husband came back to me. I got in the car with my son, and my feelings were full of oppression and sorrow. I did not want to leave the place, my husband or my memories. I was forced to leave, and my destination was Madaya. I was hoping to at least

go to my first home, to talk to it, say goodbye and ask for forgiveness. I wanted to say goodbye to my books and things. This is what I called “basic displacement,” leaving a land where you lived everything, leaving the graves of your mother and husband.

The cars dropped us off before we reached the checkpoints. We were only women and our children. We had to walk around the checkpoints without the regime forces noticing us. The mothers closed the children’s mouths with their hands so that they would not cry. They only allowed them to breathe. Then we reached a tunnel, which was illuminated by LEDs.^{xxx} It was a meter or more deep. I don’t remember how long we walked... half an hour or two, I don’t know... I didn’t think about time. I was afraid. I wondered if leaving was the right decision, or if I should have stayed and what would happen to my husband? Then I immersed myself in the moment, helping a mother carry her things or holding her son’s hand. We walked in groups and in complete secrecy. Whenever the jetfighters went away for a little while, a new group would descend and so on until we reached safety. At the end of the tunnel there is a house inhabited by a woman who receives all incoming women. She said I could stay there, but I refused, as I saw crowds of people arriving there, so where would I stay? I told her that my group was waiting for me and by that I meant my two cousins, as they had previously been displaced from Zabadani and settled in Madaya.

I did not want to live with anyone, and I moved between their homes, until one of them helped me find a house close to a medical point, so I lived there with my son. It was a different feeling there. There were no bombings, checkpoints or arrests, but the military campaign was continuing against Zabadani. I remember that one day the jetfighter hit the

xxx The “LED”, in the form commonly used in Syria, is an aluminium strip ranging from 6 to 100 cm in length and 3 mm thick. It includes a row of bright dots resembling a camera flash, the number of which varies according to the type. The LED is powered by a battery that is charged during hours when mains electricity is available.

tunnel and that many women and children were stuck in it, and their condition and that of their children was very difficult.

My husband and I used to talk every day on the mobile phone and one day his phone was out of coverage area, so I called one of his relatives and he told me that my husband was in a shelter where there was no reception. The next day I was unable to reach him, and fear began to creep into my heart, so I insisted on communicating with him and hearing his voice. I wanted to make sure that he was alive. One of his relatives told me that my husband had been injured...

This is what I called "basic displacement,"
leaving a land where you lived everything.

...leaving the graves of your mother and husband.

The siege of Madaya...

waiting for the magic wand

My husband called a few days later and told me that his leg was broken. I calmed down a little, at least he didn't die. A few days later, my uncle's wife visited me from Lebanon. She told me that she could negotiate with Hezbollah, which was besieging Madaya, and that she could take me with her to Lebanon. I called my husband to ask him, and he said to me: "The decision is yours. We have only been together for thirty-one days and I know that if you leave, I will not see you again."

I got emotional, refused to go to Lebanon and decided to stay and wait for him. During that period, Hezbollah began bombing Madaya and tightening the siege in response to the attack by the Army of Fatih in Idlib on the areas of Kafriya and Al-Foua, which are mostly inhabited by Shiites. We became besieged in Madaya, and far from our men. Even the medical service was very poor. Madaya was no longer safe at all, and many people forcibly flocked to it. There were now many women, children and men, with a scarcity of food supplies and we entered in December 2015. Hunger was prevalent. It was famine in the truest sense of the word. Many people died of starvation. Everyone who remained in Zabadani also became hungry. I would communicate with my husband and tell him that we were hungry, and he would say: Us too. I didn't know how bad my husband's condition was at the time. I was optimistic when the Four Cities Agreement was signed, as the exchange of the wounded and their families was one of its conditions. ^{xxxii}

^{xxxii} My country a tale of Homeland, Four City Agreement Declared Sectarianism and secret deals, an article, April, 2017. ([In Arabic](#)).

However, the situation did not improve in Madaya, where the bombing stopped but the siege of food and medical supplies continued. Prices inflated dramatically, and “blood merchants” became a thing, bringing in food supplies through agreements with Hezbollah, but at ridiculous prices. The price of a kilo of rice reached 100,000 Syrian pounds. My circumstances were better than others, as it was just my son and me. My husband’s family transferred some money to us whenever they could. We lived on scraps of scraps, we were very hungry, and yet I continued to teach the children and worked with a relief organisation in distributing rations and documenting names. But the siege period continued for a long time, and we began to eat tree leaves and some grass, despite their scarcity in winter. I remember that we were looking for Loquat leaves, as they were edible, and children would climb trees all day long in search of leaves to eat.

I used to get a cup of bulgur every three days, eat a meal every three days and try to provide my child with a daily meal, even if it was a small plate. Death was all around us; people fell on the road from hunger, fainted and some suffered from intestinal adhesion. Some aid came from UN agencies, but it was not enough to feed approximately 42,000 people.^{xxxiii}

Famine continued, as did the siege, and we were then in 2016, but the exchange of wounded had already started since December 2015. My husband’s name was in the first batch. He told me then about the truth about his condition. Both of his legs were broken and a tendon in his left leg was severed. There were no medical supplies, they just put salt on his wound to make it numb and eventually it festered. My husband

xxxiii For the first time since last April, the World Food Programme was able yesterday to deliver life-saving food aid to besieged families in the towns of Madaya and Zabadani in the Damascus countryside, and Fouaa and Kafraya in the Idlib countryside, as part of a convoy of several humanitarian agencies and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society.

This explanation is excerpted from a United Nations report entitled “World Food Programme delivers aid to four besieged Syrian cities for the first time since April” September 2016. ([In Arabic](#)).

called and told me that he would go through the exchange. He asked my opinion and confirmed that the decision was mine because he had influenced my decision not to go to Lebanon previously, and that he wanted me to take my own decision this time. At first, I asked him to stay, but he told me that he might not survive if he remained without treatment, so I told him to go with the convoy and that we must join him in one of the convoys to exchange the wounded and their families.

My son and I stayed in Madaya. Some food supplies began to enter in the form of aid. Most of them were grains and legumes, without fruits or vegetables. Many diseases were spread due to eating these food supplies after a long period of hunger. Children suffered from intestinal diseases and bloating, and many women and many elderly people died because they could not tolerate this food. Every time aid arrived, one of the staples was bound to be in short supply; sugar, salt or oil and as soon as it arrived, their prices shot up in the market. The situation was suitable and profitable for the “blood merchants.” We remained like this for a year and nine months, waiting for the magic wand, the “green buses,” to come and take Zabadani women and their children to their husbands in Idlib in the north. Every time we overcame one problem, another emerged. With the start of winter and extreme cold, problems like heating and lack of clothing popped up. The clothes we had were worn out and it was not possible to bring clothes in with aid. Every season of the year came with its crises. Many strange diseases spread while we awaited the day of departure to a place we do not even know. I often lost hope and I felt that we - the besieged women - along with our children were chess pieces in the hands of the armed factions on all sides. We were human shields. What saddened me most was when the men in the armed factions would go out in convoys taking their women with them, while we were in our places, and no one asked about us.



An abstract art piece of the scene that Nisreen described for the condition of her and other people during the siege in Madaya

The day of displacement... uprooting

I felt despair in many moments in Madaya, like many around me, we are the ones who do not have any connections or the ability to bear daily expenses. I became angry every time a batch went out and I was not in, or an exchange of people who were not injured, or women who were not relatives or wives of the wounded or sick men. Many times, I noticed that I was only waiting for the green bus, even though I knew that it was not the magic wand that I had hoped for. My magic wand would have stopped the war and siege and returned me and everyone else to Zabadani to rebuild the homes and schools.

Then that day came in April 2017. Many green buses entered Madaya. It is the moment of awakening. I will leave this place that has exhausted me, and I will not return to Zabadani, to my land, my home, the home of my family and my memories. How do I return to a place that is no longer mine? It is ruled by forces that killed my husband and my uncle and contributed to the killing of my mother. I had to make my mind up and convince myself I had chosen the path on which I would follow the rest of my life. I had asked my father, who was still in Zabadani, repeatedly about that decision. One time he asked me not to go and to return to him so that we could build a new life together and another time he advised me to go to my husband and have a second child. It was the first time my father couldn't help me make a decision. I said to him: You have always enabled me to make the choice I wanted and to help me handle the outcome, whether the choice was the right one or not. I will go and if my decision is wrong, you will help me come back.

Before it's time to get on the bus, I walked with my son to a hill overlooking Zabadani, and said goodbye to my country, I waved my hand to my martyr husband, my mother, to the stones I played with when I was young, to the paths I walked on, to the apple tree that was mine and had my name carved onto it, to the many places I lived in, through thick and thin [crying]. My son asked me: "Are we going back there?" I said to him: No, we are going to a faraway place where your father is (my son started calling my second husband his father). I returned to the place of the convoy and saw everyone busy carrying things and looking for their children, but I did not have any clothes at all, rather a small bag containing some sheets and blankets that I cut up and made clothes for us from.

I got on the bus without saying goodbye to anyone, as everyone would go with me, without anyone saying goodbye to me, because I am not in my original area or among my family... No one told me: I will miss you, or I will pray for your safety! I got on it like a stranger. While the bus was waiting for the others to get on the rest of the buses in the convoy (twenty or twenty-five buses), the driver got hungry, so he took out some eggs, cheese, and bread to eat. The children gathered around him with astonishment on their little faces. They had not seen this food for a long time, so the bus driver cried. He asked his colleagues to stop eating and gave all the food to the children...

I'll be honest: I'm trying to tell you everything that happened and the feelings I had before the bus moved, maybe because I don't want to get out of there. "I don't want to get out of Madaya." [crying and laughing] The bus moved towards Al-Takiyeh area, the area between Zabadani, Damascus and Lebanon. There, a harsh feeling took over me. At that moment, I felt as if I was being uprooted in every sense of the word. When we used to return from Lebanon or the Damascus and arrive

at Al-Takiya, we would breathe a sigh of relief as we are approaching Zabadani. “Ten minutes and we will reach Zabadani,” but now I am at Al-Takiya junction, displaced from Madaya to Idlib, which I only know on the map, and I may never return to my place. I may never return to Zabadani.

Suddenly I saw my father in his car, standing in front of the checkpoint at Al-Takiya. For a moment, my spirit returned. The bus moved and my father drove alongside. He could not wave at me with his hand. He was afraid that one of the soldiers or security men would know that he was my father and that they would investigate the reason for my trip to Madaya. I told the woman next to the window that my father was in that car and that I wanted to say goodbye to him, but the windows were closed and could not be opened, and I could not ask the bus driver to stop. Our eyes met for a moment... This was the last meeting and the last goodbye [crying]



An abstract art of Nisreen's scene on the displacement bus as she said her last farewell
to her father

The journey of no return and no destination

I think we stayed on the bus for a whole day or more. I can't remember. The biggest struggle for us as women was urinating or going to the bathroom, as well as for the children. The bus only stopped twice in twenty-four hours. The men got off and relieved themselves, but the women had to hold back their urine for that entire period, as getting off the bus was unsafe for them. The bus travelled through many Syrian governorates. I felt that the convoy was lengthening the route for some reason; We passed through Homs and Hama, then they said that the main road was closed, so the bus headed to the northern countryside of Aleppo. We passed through many areas of Aleppo, we passed through areas that they said were threatened or occupied by ISIS ^{xxxiv}, and the regime's accompanying vehicles were in danger. Then we passed through areas controlled by Shiite brigades, perhaps the Fatimid Brigade, and there some people began throwing stones at the buses and making offensive gestures toward women. I and those with me decided to ignore that and not increase the oppression that befell us.

The greatest danger was in an area called Ramousah. It is a point of contact and belonged to the regime, while the Rashideen area belonged to the Army of Fatih or the rebels. ^{xxxv} The displacement convoy from Madaya stopped in Ramousah and the convoy of the people of Al-Foua and Kafriya, which they exchange with us in the Al-Rashideen area. Suddenly there was an explosion. Someone blew up a bus for the people of Kafriya and Al-Foua. Unfortunately, they were all burned, women,

^{xxxiv} ISIS: Acronym for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

^{xxxv} Information about the military situation in the Ramoussa area, Sadiq Abdul Rahman, Aleppo Siege and resistance The great Exodus, Aljumphuriya, January, 2017. ([In Arabic](#)).

Source: Syrian Archive

children and men. It was a tragedy and the Youth from Zabadani who were responsible for protecting the convoy died. I and everyone on the bus were very afraid, and we expected that the regime would kill everyone in the convoy in exchange for the people who died in the explosion or that they would arrest all of us, so we exchanged names, so that if one of us survived, the families of those who did not survive would be told what had happened. ^{xxxvi}

My husband called and told me to delete everything related to him from my mobile phone because we would most likely be arrested, and he apologised to me because he had got me into this mess. Then some people said that our bus would return to Madaya. Then we saw regime forces ascending to the rooftops and pointing their weapons, including machine guns and snipers, towards us. At the same time, the UN escort and the Red Crescent began distributing some snacks and water to us. I didn't understand what was happening, were we all going to die, were they going to kill us in front of everyone, or what? After a short while, the Russian forces arrived, and negotiations began. The result was that the convoy would continue to advance towards the Al-Rashideen area. In Al-Rashideen, we received members of the Army of Conquest and Zabadani Youth who had previously been exchanged. I went with a relative of mine who was with me on the bus to Maarat Misrin, an area in Idlib, where there is a relative of my father. He told me: "Go straight to my house." I replied that I wanted to see my husband first, so he explained to me that my husband was busy securing buses and that he would come to me when he finished.

^{xxxvi} Media reports said, on Saturday, that the number of victims of the bloody bombing that targeted a gathering of buses belonging to the residents of the cities of Kafriya and Al-Foua in Aleppo had risen to about 100 dead and more than 500 wounded, most of whom were civilians. This description is excerpted from a report titled "Significant increase in displaced casualties of the Four cities", SkyNews, Arabia, April 2017. ([In Arabic](#)).

I was very tired, my body ached, and I was sleepy, so I did not discuss much. I wanted to rest, and my son wanted to eat. The man's wife, Umm Ghiyath, prepared us a lunch containing rice, milk, meat and courgette. My son was shocked when he saw all that food. I felt like he was coming out of a cave, from deep hibernation. He did not know what was happening in the world, but he was one of the besieged people. Umm Ghiyath's cried when she saw what happened to my son, and he said to her: "Don't cry, I'm not an orphan, I'm just hungry, I want to eat and I won't be ashamed of you, you are my relative" [laughter].

I stayed a night at Umm Ghiyath's house. The next day I asked about my husband, and they said that he would come when he finished his work. I was angry and afraid that he had died in the bombing, but he came hours later. Our meeting was wonderful, and I was happy to see him alive. He was beginning to recover and could walk with a slight limp. I felt like I was born again. He took me to Maarat al-Numan area, where he lived. I stayed in a fairly well-equipped house. My husband settled in Maarat al-Numan, where his doctor who followed his case also worked. But I felt lonely after a while, as there were no people from Zabadani there. I also needed a job, as the financial situation was bad. It was difficult to find work in Maarat al-Numan, especially since I did not have identification papers or certificates, as they still at our last house in Zabadani. Do you remember when I told you that my husband wanted to burn the house in Zabadani with everything in it before we left? He couldn't do that because he was injured at the time and all our papers stayed at home.

Most of the people of Zabadani gathered in Idlib, the city, and I communicated with some of them. They secured me a job with a relief organisation where I had previously worked in its office in Madaya, so I did

not need my papers. We decided to move to Idlib the city and I worked there in a psychological support program dedicated to alleviating the effects of the violence suffered by young men and women who had been displaced from Zabadani.

After we settled in Idlib, I asked my father to obtain new documents for us, so my father was forced to sell a piece of land so that he could pay the costs of bribes to obtain the documents, and things became easier, thank God. I was pregnant and gave birth to my second son, I was ecstatic.

In 2019, the bombing of Idlib began and the old nightmare returned again.^{xxxvii} Regime forces stormed many areas until they reached the Saraqib area. I decided to leave, because I was never ready to hear the sound of the jetfighter and its missiles; or to live in fear again. We moved to Afrin city in Aleppo, and we are still there.

Afrin is my refuge; I love its people and I feel that it is a miniature version of Syria. I work here and live all the details of my daily life in this place. I feel safe in my house, but I feel that it is not my real home. Not even the pillow I sleep on is mine, but I belong here more than Idlib. I refuse anyone to impose restrictions on me as the authorities were doing in Idlib or teach me what Islam is. It is my religion and I know very well how to be a Muslim. But I will not hide that I feel saddened here and I cannot talk about that for security reasons.

xxxvii More than 235,000 people were displaced within two weeks as a result of the recent military escalation in Idlib Governorate in Northwestern Syria, according to what the United Nations announced on Friday (December 27, 2019), coinciding with the intensification of the regime forces and their Russian ally and the pace of their raids on the region.

This explanation is excerpted from a report by DW Arabic entitled “The United Nations: 235 thousand people were displaced from Idlib due to the recent bombing” December 2019. ([In Arabic](#)).

How do I return to a place that is
no longer mine?

"I don't want to get out of Madaya."

I walked with my son to a hill overlooking
Zabadani and bid farewell to my home

No one told me: I will miss you or I will pray
for your safety! I got on like a stranger

"I don't want to get out of Madaya."

I may never return to Zabadani.

It's not my real home
Not even the pillow I sleep on is mine

What happened to my house in Zabadani and what is justice?

A large part of my home was destroyed, but only one habitable room remained. It is now inhabited by a family whose house was completely destroyed. They contacted us and asked us if we would allow them to live there. The house is registered in my eldest son's name. His grandfather gave it to him before he died in the siege of Madaya and all his uncles agreed to that. I asked my son if he wanted rent from the family living in his house, but he refused and said that his father loved that family and would be content in his grave if he did not receive any financial compensation for their living in the house.



Map of the place using Google Earth in 2023

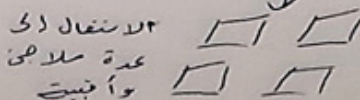
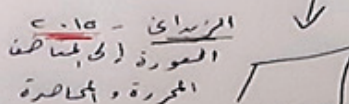
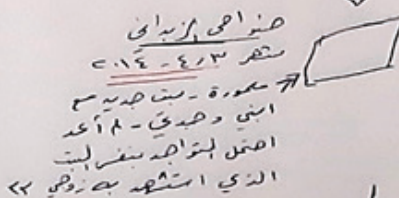
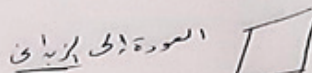
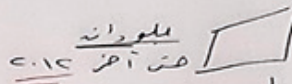
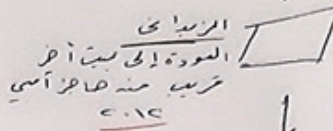
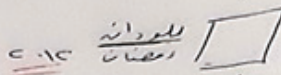
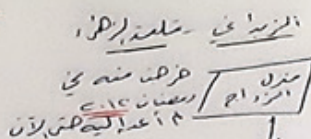
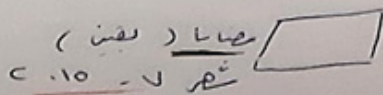
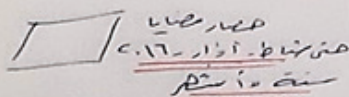
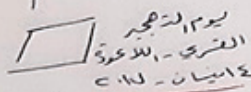
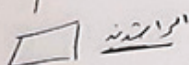
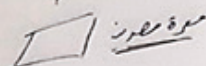
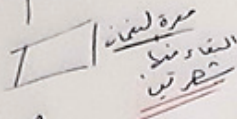
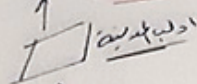
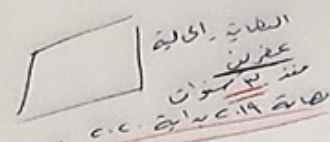
I miss that place very much and I dedicate Fayrouz's song "Alone They Remain" I feel that Zabadani misses all of its sons and daughters, children playing on the streets, washing their faces with the water from its springs, women walking in the neighbourhoods, and collecting Mallow plant leaves from the surrounding lands.

I do not know if justice can be achieved. I want to hug my father, to sit with him next to my mother's grave to exchange conversations with her, as we used to do in 2012. We used to take a teapot to her grave with three cups, as she also loved tea. Can this be achieved? I want the Syrian regime to be held accountable for every drop of blood that was shed and for every tear that my son and I cried. Can this be achieved?



An abstract art of Nisreen's wish to return with her father to sit in front of her mother's grave in Zabadani to talk to her and drink tea.

سفرين اعد الله
مسار التهجير



I want my name to be

Fayrouz... _____

Story telling date: July 2022

The place and I when we were together

My family, the break-ins and I in 2011

The carpets of our home are on the barrel of the tank

My revolution, my first arrest, then reconciliation with the homeland

I was teaching in Madaya, but the sniper had a different opinion

The siege of Madaya, my marriage and me

Hunger and means of survival in the siege of Madaya

The last farewell to Madaya and the displacement to Idlib

The Syrian regime and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham both prevented me from completing my studies

Waiting for someone I don't know to take me on an unknown path

Between residence and birth, between Mersin and Bursa

My brother, my mother's visit and my return to Reyhaniyya

Loneliness, harassment and blackmail... But I did not stand idly by

Who am I now and what is my relationship with places?

How can justice be served for both me and the place?

The path of Fayrouz's displacement until the date of telling her story

The place and I when we were together

I am from Madaya; I am 28 years old. I lived most of my childhood and adolescence in Zabadani, the area adjacent to my hometown of Madaya, and for some years I lived in Damascus. I returned to live in Madaya after the revolution in 2011 for many reasons. I will mention them all if I can organize my thoughts. Now, I live in Turkey, I have children and a husband, I study at university, and I have been working for a few months with the Women Now organization.

I will talk about the places I have lived, and they have lived within me throughout my life, even though I am still 28 years old. I will talk about my childhood home... I was born in a beautiful home, which my mother had the largest hand in beautifying and preserving.

Before you enter my home, let me paint you a picture of the walnut trees, giant trees that surrounded our home, many of which I had climbed. The

walnut season usually came with the start of school, and we tried hard not to dye our hands with walnut henna before school started. Beyond the walnut trees, there is a staircase like a stage, consisting of three steps and a platform for the entrance to the home. In fact, it was a platform on which I always recited my poetry. I didn't tell you that I was very talented at reciting poetry... On that platform were two small Cupressus trees, pruned in a beautiful circular shape, showing my mother's attention to the smallest details.

You enter to find a large salon with rooms distributed on either side... That home contained many of our childhood memories, and our mischief, and it was also the beginning of my father and mother's journey together.

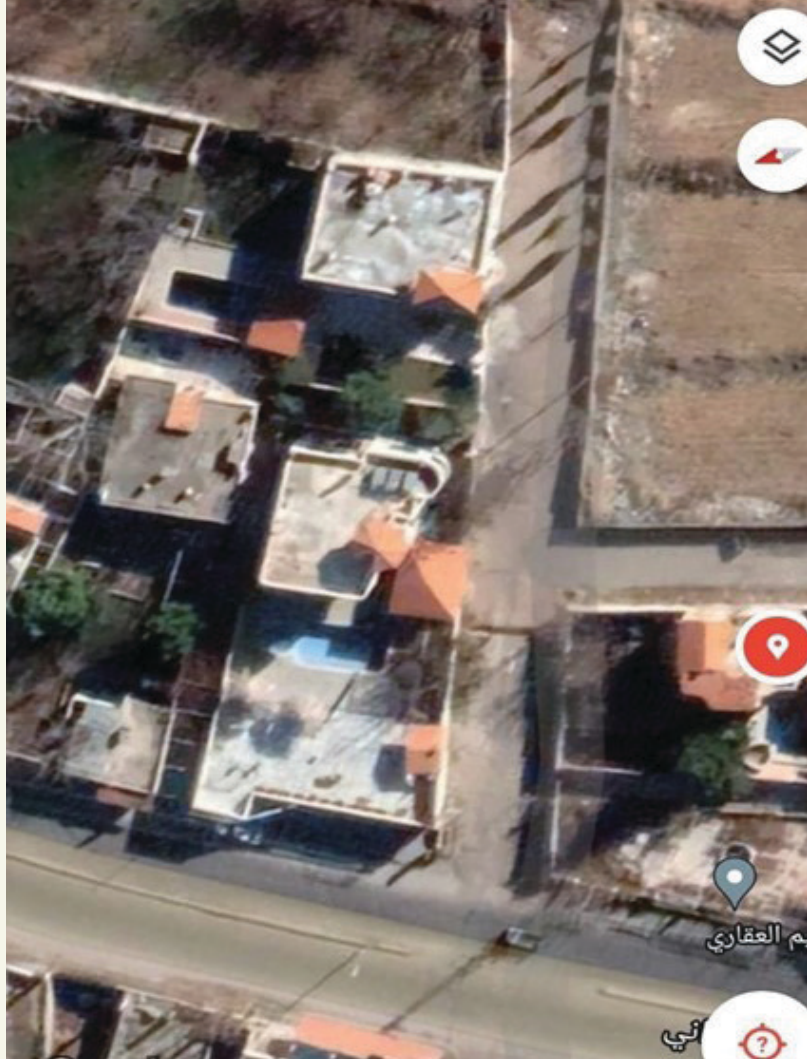
My parents decided to increase the area of the house by building an additional floor. In the countryside, houses are not built all at once, but are expanded whenever "Allah" granted provision for His servants. I carefully observed the details of the new house, as well as the workers or "masters," whom I found had each mastered their profession remarkably well. (Uncle Abu Muhammad, Uncle Abu Jaafar and Abu Ali) I recited to all of them some of the poetry I memorised, and I listened to their songs and their chants.

The house was completed, and it was modern by the standards of that time. Marble floors, wide windows and a large balcony with arches, overlooking our wonderful plain. We lived in that house for five years, which I consider to be some of the most beautiful years of our lives, perhaps because we were together. None of us had gone to Damascus to study, and none of us had been expatriates. That roof brought us together like no other.

Five years passed and provisions came back and knocked on our door. My father, driven by my mother's desire, decided to build a "villa," which is a common term for an independent building with multiple floors. A villa in our countryside does not just mean a building, it is something made by hands that you can be proud of. My father, who did not complete his education because he was orphaned when he was young, excelled in building our home, and my mother, the teacher who devoted her life to her family, excelled too in building our villa. That home was the result of harmony between them in a forty-year-old marriage.

I will tell you about an anecdote before I continue. While my father was digging the foundations of the house, my uncle decided that our great-grandfather had buried a treasure in this land, and he did not rest his mind until he brought a man from Damascus carrying two sticks made of metal. They should touch each other when they find the treasure, but I... I think they were fighting, so they never got close or touched each other [laughter].

I will share my home's location with you on the map because I am always looking for it and checking on it. It is on the main highway between Damascus and Bludan area, next to the Florida Restaurant. The state gave a name to our street, "Uqba bin Nafi." I was so happy with this name. In rural areas, we never deal with official names for streets or neighbourhoods, and even after this name was given to our street, no one used it, but I was happy with it.



Fayrouz shared the home site herself with us during research.

Our home was extraordinarily beautiful, A two-story villa and a swimming pool, in which my father engraved letters of our names. My family has refused to sell it until now, as it is the family home, even though they sold a lot of properties during the revolution, and the army occupied our home for a long time, destroyed its essence and broke many of its corners, but my family decided to keep it after they got it back. Even

now, I look and contemplate pictures of the house a lot, my room, the terrace, the pool. Honestly, I cannot see a more beautiful or warmer home than ours [laughter].

When you enter the car garage, in front of you there are Mango, kaki, apricot and walnut trees. The apricot tree has special memories because I used to always climb it, sometimes to reach the second floor [laughter]. After those trees, you will find an artificial waterfall made of stone, surrounded by roses and plants that my mother dedicated herself to planting and taking care of. How magical it was to have a cup of coffee there! The house begins with the reception hall, the living room (dining room) and there is an Arab Majlis (seating area). When guests come to us, the men sat in the reception hall and women sat in the Arab Majlis, next to which is the kitchen and bathroom.

Thus, we have finished the first floor. We go up a staircase that my mother changed four times to take the shape she wanted, and we reach the second floor, where we are greeted by the “Sabbat” that we inherited from my fourth great grandmother (great, great, great, grandmother), which is a large box decorated with mosaics and inlaid with silver, above it. Arab swords and my grandfather’s sword, and underneath are hand-made carpets and copper pieces that we inherited, such as coffee pots and roasting utensils.

The second floor has a wrap-around kitchen of an American style, then a space where we, brothers and sisters, gathered when we left our rooms [Joy], followed by a small library, and facing it are my room and the rooms of my older brothers and sisters, then the room of my younger brothers who have now grown up. I spent a long time in my room with yellow and tiled walls whose colours I chose myself, but later I asked

my father to change them because what he mixed with the paint did not resemble the colours, I requested at the time... But now, I adore those colours, no matter how ugly they are.

I loved my older sister's room and spent long hours of the day in it. I would escape to her when my mother asked me to stay in my room to study [laughter]. Frankly, she had a special room.



A photo of the entrance to Fayrouz's home in Madaya, which she shared with us during research.



A view from the balcony of Fayrouz's sister's room, which she shared with us during research.

When I passed the ninth grade and my sister passed her baccalaureate, my family threw us a party at the pool. I loved that party so much and how very happy I was at that time. I felt for the first time that I was the centre of a happy, noisy occasion. In those days, I was Fayrouz, who did everything silently and did not oppose anyone. She cried quickly and was extremely sensitive. In fact, I was a somewhat anti-social girl. I only had my studies and books, and I did not even do household chores. Now I realise what beautiful days they were, full of luxury or they may be normal for a girl my age, but if I compare them to what happened later, they are definitely days filled with safety, love and simplicity, and I thank my family very much for those days and moments, and that wonderful party, because later on I will not have any celebrations, even when I get married...



A photo of the main entrance of Fayrouz's home in Madaya, which she shared with us during research.



A photo of Fayrouz's house swimming pool, which she shared with us during research.

As for Madaya, although I used to live there, I did not get involved much or get to know it during my childhood. My father was afraid of some dangers there, as there was a lot of smuggling since it was a border area with Lebanon, so my brothers and I were studying in a school in Zabadani. I studied at Zabadani Girls School, and we had to take a bus every day to and from it. The baccalaureate year is an important year for every student in Syria, so you can imagine how that was for a student from the countryside, whom everyone knew and was waiting for her results: “So-and-so’s daughter got these marks and so-and-so’s son earned that.” This conversation continued for a long time after the results were announced, which made this year a standard for success or failure at various levels, so we worked hard to search for distinguished teachers. When I learned that a talented teacher was moving to Madaya High School, I moved there. This transition was not easy for me at first, as students treated me as if I had come from another country. It seemed that my dress was different, in addition to the fact that I was very diligent in studying and from a well-known family, so they did not accept me well at first, but that experience refined something in my personality, which began to change and grow stronger, especially since I was in a mixed school with boys and girls for the first time.

That roof brought us together like no other.

Honestly, I cannot see a more beautiful or warmer home than ours

It was magical to have a cup of coffee there!

A two-story villa and a swimming pool, in which my father engraved letters of our names

Mango, kaki, apricot and walnut trees

what beautiful days they were, full
of luxury

My family, the break-ins and me in 2011

I, along with my brothers, sisters, and family, followed the Arab Spring revolutions before the revolution in Syria. I come from a family, some of whose members received a large share of detainment and displacement during the events of the 1980s, and we children were raised to fear the Syrian regime and its ability to oppress. My father, who lived different stage of the Syrian regime and was arrested in the 1980s to force his brother to surrender, was happy with what was happening in the Arab countries, but he was wary of a revolution occurring in Syria and used to say, “You don’t know who you are dealing with,” because he was aware of the extent of the cruelty and violence that the Syrian people would receive if they took to the streets demanding the overthrow of this regime.

In 2011, I was a student at Damascus University. My brothers and I had to wake up early, around five, because our home was secluded and so far, away, and we needed time to prepare ourselves and go to our universities and schools. On the sixth day of May 2011, I saw the army and cars gathering around the house. They stormed it violently. Neither I nor my brothers and sisters were dressed yet. It was our first experience with break-ins. They did not knock on the door but jumped off the fences and this made us unable to catch our breath or gather our thoughts to understand what was happening. They were led by a person wearing a mask over his face. Later, he was called an informant. He was a civilian who accompanied the army forces to show them the houses. “This is so-and-so’s house and so-and-so lives here.” They entered with their military boots and loud voices. We did not see how they took my father. They immediately put the “tracksuit top” upside down on his head to

prevent him from seeing. I shouted: “Dad.” A soldier said, “He will come back soon,” but he did not return until three months later.

They wandered around the house, barbarically searching everything and stole everything that was low in weight and high in value.

The officer asked my mother: “Aren’t you afraid?” She replied: “Why should we be afraid?!”

He answered with amazement: “How do you live in such a house and want a revolution? Do you know how people live?”

My mother did not answer his question, as her concern was to know my father’s fate. My mother immediately began contacting our acquaintances who could intervene to get my father out of detention or find out what would happen to him, and we stayed at home for five full days until the campaign ended. In those days, my mother forbade us from moving or even from turning on a light in the house. She was particularly afraid for us girls. She even asked a relative to come and get us, but we did not go. My mother also asked my brother to stay in Damascus for fear that he too would be arrested.

A month after the end of the campaign, we had the second raid, during which they arrested my brother, and now my father and brother were in detention. My mother cried a lot and asked them to take everything and leave her son to her, I have never seen her as broken down as she was then. We were all depressed about our situation and the condition of my father and brother, about whom we knew nothing. We then moved for ten days to Bludan area to get away from home for a little while, as there had been many raids there because it was at the entrance of Madaya. We returned home and a few days later my father came out of detention. My joy was great, but my shock was greater. My father, who weighed one hundred kilograms and was very tall, came out strangely thin, van-

quished and silent. He did not tell us about anything that had happened to him in prison. Unlike my brother, who was released four months after his arrest, his condition was difficult, but he talked a lot about what happened to him, perhaps because it was his first arrest.

I determined my position after my father was released from prison. I have no excuse not to stand against injustice. I am with the revolution and against the regime and I will begin participating in the demonstrations... I will not be silent anymore.

The carpets of our house are on the barrel of the tank

In February of 2012, the regime forces launched the first military campaign in Madaya region. We left the house and rented a house in Bludan with my aunt's family and another family. It was bitterly cold in that unheated house in February, which is known to be extremely cold and snowy in our areas. We learned that the army had settled in our home during the campaign, so we waited until it ended, thinking that the army personnel would leave, but they did not. My father and mother went home and talked to the army personnel about why they were staying. My parents told them that we wanted to go home, and they told them that this house was inhabited by armed rebels. My mother told them that this was a lie and that we were the family who lived in the house, so one of the officers said to her: "Another word and I'll direct the tank at the house." My mother remained silent and told them that she no longer wanted anything and then she and my father left. We were then forced to move to a house in the same area of Madaya, and my father was constantly trying to find a way to get the army out of the house, and after a large number of attempts and paying huge sums of money to those who

mediated to solve this problem, the army members left it.

We were astonished by the state of the house when we returned. We saw the tank coming out with the carpets of our house on its barrel. We found the house almost empty of all our belongings, furniture, pictures, and clothes. The dining table outside was burned, the four corners of the house were empty, and the walls were filled with slogans about the victory of the Syrian army. They stole all the copperware and antiques that my father had inherited or collected and burned everything they could not carry. They left only part of the books, but the other part they burned to stay warm.

One of the soldiers offered my mother to buy the blankets from him that he had stolen from the house. She told him: Will you sell me my stuff? So, he said to her: Yes! She suppressed her frustration and bought some blankets from him.

We are here in June or July 2012. During that period, I was still able to go to Damascus as the road leading there was still open. I learned that there was a market in Damascus where items looted by the Syrian army and security forces were being sold. I went there, looking for antiques and copperware for our house, and I found a copper coffee grinder. I bought it for three thousand Syrian pounds. I returned home and told my father filled with a feeling of victory. "I got back something you love."

The condition of our house was miserable, in need of many repairs, and it was difficult to live in it with all the devastation left by the army, so we returned to the house that we had previously rented in Madaya, but my mother continued to go to our house every day to try to restore what could be restored or to bring workers to fix it. She would come back at night only to sleep with us. She was very psychologically hurt by what happened at home, and she had to go there every day, otherwise she would feel upset, as if a piece of her soul had been taken from her.

My revolution, my first arrest, then reconciliation with the homeland

It became difficult to go to Damascus every day, so I stayed in a girls' residence affiliated with the Ministry of Endowments in the Kafr Sousse area in Damascus. The residence was composed of several floors. The first floor contained the administration and library, the second was for girls studying Islam and the third was for us students. We had to adhere to a specific dress code. It was not permissible to wear trousers even while sleeping, and we must adhere to strict rules for waking up and sleeping to carry out religious duties that are only consistent with the approach of the "Al Qubaysiat." I could not continue to live under this pressure, so I went back to looking for housing in Damascus and I found some of my colleagues living in the town of Al-Maliha, near Damascus.

Services were almost non-existent. I lived in a small traditional house which was chaotic in design and had no sewage system. I could not stay for even a week, and I moved to another house in the Mezzeh area, which was the last house I inhabited in Damascus. The Mezzeh area is famous for its wide highway and beautiful Damascene buildings, but behind those buildings the pain of Syrian men and women was spreading and hiding in small homes. The highway was a facade of poverty and fatigue that I was ignorant of in both my people and my country. I met a student at the university whose brother works with activists, and I was proud of my help. Our roles as women were unclear, but they were important for our ability to cross the military and security barriers at the time, while this was difficult for men. ^{xxxviii} I could not continue to help

^{xxxviii} Security scrutiny was more severe for men and youth than for women and girls when passing through military and security checkpoints, especially at the beginning of the revolution in Syria. (Author).

the activists because of the security forces' raids on the areas they were in. There were military campaigns on various areas in Damascus and its countryside, including the Al-Hama area, where young men from our town went and lived to coordinate with the rest of the Damascus countryside.

I forgot to tell you about my arrest. I cannot remember the events in a sequential manner, but at the end of March 2012, a group of both female and male students and I decided to raise the revolution flag on the building of the College of Agriculture in Damascus. We did not have sufficient awareness of the risks that we might face by carrying out such an act and we did not even have an escape plan. The security forces immediately arrested me and took me to the college dean's office. I pretended that I was dizzy in an attempt to stall, and the Brigadier General sympathised with me a little. He called and told my family that I would be arrested, and they actually took me to the Airforce Security Branch. I knew that my arrest would be shocking to my family, but at the same time, I was a little relieved knowing that my father would not save any effort to get me out. Two young men, one named Alaa and the other Qu-say, interrogated me. I later discovered that they were college students. Their goal was for me to give them a name of the students who participated with me, especially the female students... I was very nervous and mixed up the names and gave them incorrect names.

They used to give me harsh sentences to scare me, such as: "Do you know that as soon as you entered our place, what will happen to you? No one will look at you or say hello to you," and another sentence, "Do you know what we can do with you before we return you to your father?"

How ugly and cruel that speech was, and they struck a sensitive nerve.

They put me in solitary for a month and a half, and before I left, the head of the security branch summoned me to his office, which was full of leather sofas. I was forbidden from raising my head or looking at him. "Put your head down." I was still naive at that time. I asked him to discuss it and he spewed a sermon targeted at me telling me that he would not discuss with those who denied the blessing of free education in Syrian universities, and that he was disappointed that a university student like me had been deceived and before I left his office, he asked me to cooperate with them.

Before I was released, I signed a white piece of paper. I didn't know what was written on it until later. When I arrived at my family's, I told them everything that had happened and they asked me to forget about university. I am no longer allowed to go there, for fear that any cooperation with security forces will be imposed on me or that I will be arrested again. My father paid about ten thousand dollars as a bribe to get me out, because he knows the cruelty of the detention centre and the security branches, especially towards women.

In fact, I stayed in the house that we rented in Madaya with my family, and I tried to forget about studying initially. During that period, which was the end of 2012, I met a handsome young man from Homs. I had heard a lot about his heroism as an activist. This young man later became my husband. One day in 2013, at the end of October, I was going with my mother to Damascus to buy some things for my engagement and we stopped at every checkpoint. I think the number of checkpoints between Madaya and Damascus was close to twenty. Al-Takiyya checkpoint was the most important and it contained a room for searching women. They took us down for inspection and a woman who volunteered with security forces took my mobile phone to search it. There was nothing on it,

but by chance she saw a WhatsApp picture of a child wearing a scarf that said, “There is no god but God.” Then she found a picture of a cake with the word “Freedom” written on it. She decided to stop me. She was very angry. My mother begged her to leave us alone and she responded to her in an offensive manner. I attacked her, grabbed the collar of her military uniform and asked her to talk to my mother with respect. At that point, she got mad and sent me and my mother to the officer.

The officer looked at our papers and began his great speech about how I was an agriculture engineering student and that I should be more aware. Meanwhile, someone from my distant family, a drug dealer, called him. We were avoiding talking to this person, but he was released from prison at the beginning of the revolution and began to sponsor what was known at the time as “reconciliations.” I heard their conversation and understood that I could only be taken out through reconciliation or an exchange for two weapon pieces. It made me very sad that the person mediating my escape was a drug dealer, and that my father certainly had to ask for his intervention to get me out of that ordeal. My mother returned to Madaya and security forces took me to Damascus, to the Republican Palace in the Rawda area, where reconciliations take place

.

I was the only girl there, but the rest were all young men, some of whom were from my town. I was astonished to see them, as reconciliation with the regime means that the person will admit his betrayal of the country and ask for reconciliation. They asked us to fill out forms, then the head of security entered and greeted us, and began his sermon stating that he himself was an opponent of the government and that the first demonstration he participated in was when he was fifteen years old. He told us that we had misunderstood the meaning of revolution, and that revolutions occur to reform the country and not to corrupt it. I do not

know what happened to me or how I told him: “The people who were attacked by a chemical weapon were not corrupt or armed gangs, they were civilians.” He told me: “We admit this mistake that forced us to lose the chemical arsenal.” He admitted that they were the ones who released the chemical weapons. I do not know if he said it casually or slipped his tongue, but I tell this story to everyone I meet. This officer admitted to the regime’s use of chemical weapons. We all signed the reconciliation papers; I think I still have a copy of them. They sent the guys to Madaya and asked me to wait. I waited for a few hours, then they released me. When I returned, my family and my fiancé were waiting for me. My father’s face was pale. I had never seen him look so helplessness before. As for my mother, she was very angry with me and said that I was prohibited from leaving Madaya. I expected that reaction from my family, especially since the young men from the village who returned before me had published what had happened and how I had spoken to the head of security. At that point I started to feel like... I am no longer the quiet, shy Fayrouz, but the strong Fayrouz She defends herself and others. I was happy about this change in my personality.

وثيقة عهد وتعهد

أقر واتعهد أنا الموقع أدناه المواطن السوري :

الاسم :

الشهرة :

اسم الأب :

اسم الأم :

مكان وتاريخ الولادة : مضايا

الرقم الوطني :

نوع السلاح :



بأنه وبعد أن تأكد لي حجم المؤامرة التي تهدف إلى تشويه ديني الحنيف و قتل أخواني وشعبي وأبناء وطني وتسيير بلدي سوريا وحرصاً مني على أن تكون سورية منيعة ضد الأعداء والعملاء ويسودها الأمن والأمان والوحدة الوطنية ومنعاً لتشويه ديننا العظيم فإنني أعاهد واتعهد بعدم إثارة الشعب أو التظاهر أو رفع الشعارات أو كتابتها أو التحريض عليها أو السكوت أو التستر على من يرتكبها أو يحرض لها وكذلك عدم تخريب أو تعطيل الممتلكات العامة والخاصة أو حمل السلاح أو حيازته أو شرائه أو لاتجار أو تهريبه وبأي شكل من الأشكال وبغض النظر عن نوعه أو مسماه

وأقر بأنني على علم واطلاع على العقوبات المترتبة على مخالفتي لذلك وأعاهد واتعهد بأن أعمل جاهداً ودائماً في ظل الدولة لبناء عزة وقوة ديننا الحنيف والمواطنين الشرفاء وسورية وشعبها الكريم

وأشهد الله على عهدي وتعهدي وهو خير الشاهدين

ملاحظة : إن أي حك أو تعديل أو تصوير لهذه الوثيقة يعرض صاحبها لمسؤولية كبيرة .

حرر بتاريخ ٢٠١٣ / ١٠ / ٨

البصمة

التوقيع

الاسم الكامل

A photo of the reconciliation document or pledge that Fairouz signed for her release, which she shared with us during research.



An abstract art of Fayrouz's situation when she confronted the officer

I was teaching in Madaya, but the sniper had a different opinion.

I tried to be active during my stay in Madaya. It was clear that the educational level of children was deteriorating as a result of the situation in general, so I sometimes volunteered to give lessons in schools and at other times I tutored children in my home. It was a beautiful period. The children loved me, and I gained a good reputation as a teacher. I began teaching with a group of young people opposing the regime in an institute we founded to support students of all educational levels.

I continued to do this until the end of December 2013, when one day that month I was on my way back home and the road was not safe, as the eastern mountain of Madaya was under the control of the Syrian regime forces and Hezbollah forces. I knew that there was a sniper and I avoided being in his sights. It seems that I was just avoiding him psychologically, convincing myself that I was safe, but the sniper that day decided to fire his bullet and he hit me in the stomach.

People heard that the sniper had taken his shot, and my fiancé was in my family's house. My family loved him as their son, and he loved them very much. He would spend his time in our house, even if I was not there. They all rushed to the street. My fiancé tried to carry me, but he could not bear the sight of the blood that was covering me, so my father carried me, but as for me, the pain I felt was terrible, burning, and I remember asking them for any anaesthetic to relieve the pain.

I woke up in the underground field hospital and heard that the bullet had entered my intestines and that I needed a major abdominal operation. There was a shortage of blood bags and sanity, as the hospital was

not well equipped, but the doctor there, who was from Daraa province, returned from the United States when the revolution began, to serve the people of his country. He performed the operation on me with what he had, and the operation was successful. I did not recover well after the operation due to the lack of medication, so my father decided to take me to a hospital in Damascus. This idea was difficult to achieve at that time when going to Damascus had become forbidden and fraught with many risks. He had to communicate with the men of reconciliation, who were among the worst people who took advantage of the situation and emerged at that stage. The security forces allowed me to move through the checkpoints and I spent fifteen days in Jaffa Hospital in the Mezzeh area of Damascus. My mother stayed with me during that period, but the security personnel learned that I had been hit by a bullet and came to investigate. My mother told them that there were a lot of revenge kills in our area and that a stray bullet had hit me.

After fifteen days, we returned to Madaya, and we also needed a large intermediary to move through the checkpoints. I was very tired during the recovery period. Abdominal surgery requires a long time to heal, and my wound was ugly and large. I cried when I saw it for the first time and saw the shape of the stitches, and to comfort me, the nurse told me at the time that I would forget this pain and the shape of my stomach when I got pregnant and had children, as this was nothing compared to pregnancy and childbirth. Her words terrified me and did not comfort me at all [laughter]. There were complications from the injury, and I was in poor health even after eight months, so my father was forced to contact the reconciliation men again and they issued a document in my name, exactly like the one I had previously signed when I was detained. That paper had a magical effect on the military and security forces checkpoints, and I was able to take it to Damascus more than once to treat complications.



An abstract art of Fayrouz's condition when she was hit by a sniper's bullet

وثيقة عهد وعهد

أقر واتعهد أنا الموقع أدناه المواطن السوري :

الاسم :

الشهرة :

اسم الأب :

اسم الأم :

مكان وتاريخ الولادة :

الرقم الوطني :

نوع السلاح :

باته وبعث أن تأكد لي حجم المؤامرة التي تهدف إلى تشويه ديني الحنيف و قتل أخواني وشعبي وأبناء وطني وتدمير بلدي سوريا وحرصا مني على أن تكون سورية مبنية ضد الأعداء : إصلاها ويسودها الأمن والأمان والوحدة الوطنية ومنعا لتشويه ديننا العظيم فإني أعاهد وأتعهد بعدم إثارة الشغب أو التظاهر أو رفع الشعارات أو كتابتها أو التحريض عليها أو السكوت أو التستر على من يرتكبها أو يحرض لها وكذلك عدم تخريب أو تعطيل الممتلكات العامة وخاصة أو حمل السلاح أو حيازته أو شرائه أو لاتجار أو تهريبه وبأي شكل من الأشكال وبغض النظر عن نوعه أو مسماه

وأقر باتني على علم واطلاع على العقوبات المترتبة على مخالفتي لذلك وأعاهد وأتعهد بأن أعمل جاداً ودائماً في ظل الدولة لبناء عزة وقوة ديننا الحنيف والمواطنين الشرفاء وسورية وشعبها الكريم

والشاهد الله على عهدي وتعهدتي وهو خير الشاهدين

ملاحظة : إن أي حذ أو تعديل أو تنوير لهذه الوثيقة يعرض صاحبها لمسؤولية كبيرة .

حرر بتاريخ ٢٠١٤ / ٨ / ١٧

الاسم الك :

التوقيع

البصمة

A photo of the reconciliation document or pledge that Fairouz signed to facilitate her movement at security and military checkpoints during the period of treatment for her injury. She shared it with us during research.

My health started to improve after a while and I returned to teaching and continuing what I was doing, but at the end of 2014, a shell fell in front of our house and my father was injured by some shrapnel, the most dangerous of which settled in the optic nerve. None of the medical

staff in our area was able to treat this injury, so the only solution was for my father to go to Turkey to receive appropriate treatment. He sold an apartment he owned and asked me to go with him because I was fluent in English. We agreed with one of the people to take us across the regular road to the Syrian border without our names being searched at the checkpoints, and we paid him money, of course. We arrived at the Lebanese border in the Masnaa' area. I was greatly shocked by the huge number of Syrian men and women there and the insulting and humiliating treatment of us by the Lebanese staff. I was exposed to horrific situations and saw difficult human situations. Families, women and children wait for a long time in the cold of the first month of the year. An old woman from the Mezzeh area stood in that long line, carrying her hotel reservation and a thousand dollars to show the officer.^{xxxix} He never looked at her and when she asked for a chair to sit, the officer replied: "You don't have a pretty girl who could ask for those things for you."

There was also a young man from Daraa province waiting the night before. When his turn came, even though his papers were complete, the officer told him: "You go back to Syria." How disappointing this sentence was, the rotten fruit of waiting, toiling, and enduring all that time. My father told him: "Don't go back, try again," but he was tired, so he went back, and we later learned that he had been arrested at a Syrian checkpoint. I also remember the poet "Farid" who was waiting for approval to go to the United Arab Emirates. It was an opportunity for him to win the Sharjah Poetry Prize. He remained silent, contemplating the people without saying a word. His plane was late and ours was late as well. We had to make reservations again and waited for twenty-two hours until they let us in. We slept in a relative's house for one night and then travelled to Mersin in Turkey where we stayed at a relative's house of my father.

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These were the conditions for Syrian women and men to enter Lebanon at that time. (Author).

The language was the first thing that shocked me in Turkey. We did not benefit from my mastery of the English language [laughter] because no one there speaks English, and no one wants to speak anything other than Turkish. My father and I stayed for five months until the treatment was completed. The situation was not rosy for the Syrians there, but it was not bad if we compare it to the current situation, so my father thought about starting a business in partnership with a relative there, but the latter deceived my father. At that time, most Syrians were talking about going to Europe by sea. We thought about that, but my mother called my father to tell him that Officer Suhail, who was at the checkpoint near our house, was asking about him and the house. This question was an indication of the strong possibility that the officer would seize the house.

Between traveling to Europe and losing our home or returning to the hell of siege and bombing and keeping it, we chose the latter and returned. My father asked me to come back before him to see the state of the road, and indeed, I came back before he did, and he followed me weeks later.

The siege of Madaya, my marriage and me

I returned from Turkey to Madaya at the end June 2015. Everything was different. The strong features of the siege began to burden the people: scarcity of food supplies and inflated prices, in addition to preventing people from moving outside Madaya. In fact, everyone who had an ID card from Zabadani was forced to enter Madaya and stay there. My mother was known for her winter supplies and the large quantities she made to last us throughout the winter, but she used all of those supplies to meet our needs for food and to meet the needs of the women dis-

placed from Jobar area to Zabadani, who lived with us for some time. During that period, my father, mother and the rest of my siblings decided to return to the family home for reasons that you may find strange, but they were strategic at the time. House theft began to rise, so my parents preferred to stay in their home to protect it. The Syrian regime forces also built a new checkpoint opposite our house, so it was between two checkpoints and with my family moving there and bribing the regime personnel at the checkpoint, my father was able to secure some food supplies and prevent the regime forces from occupying our house again. As for me, my sister and my brother, we stayed in the rented house inside Madaya and my father was able to obtain papers for us allowing us to move across the checkpoints as “a teacher”, as my sister was also teaching children. During our travel I used to hide a lot of foodstuffs under my clothes because I was skinny. I put food in my stomach area, my chest, my boots and even under my hijab. I took advantage of the fact that these checkpoints did not search women, so we used to take some food supplies from my family’s house in this way to our area where food began to become a luxury. All of this was not easy, of course, neither passing through the checkpoints nor the fear or terror accompanying moving under constant bombing, but we had to do it in order to continue living and help people. In those days, I felt that my personality was strong and that I had a purpose in life, even though my mother was sad about my fate and my failure to complete my university studies, but I was not sad. Rather, I found that what I was doing, as simple as it was, was more important than completing my studies.

I could not continue with the mission of transporting food, because one of the people benefiting from the siege situation informed the checkpoints that these two women (me and my sister) were smuggling food supplies during their travel. One of the officers came to our house and

told my father that either the girls should stay here or go into town and never see them again. My sister stayed at my family's house, and I decided to return inside Madaya, to the siege, where my brother and fiancé were. That was my last meeting with my father, who then asked me to stay with him, but I refused. I thought about my brother and my fiancé, who would be with them? Who will help them and cook for them? I thought about all the humanitarian tasks I was doing... And entered the siege.

The siege has a life unlike the one we know, a constant question about food and pale faces everywhere. I was still a teacher. Most parents sent their sons and daughters to school to avoid asking them about food and having them cry from hunger for a few hours. My and my colleagues' mission was to relieve the children, but I was also hungry, so how could I do that? I created a school class that I called the food class, in which we collect some food or cooking items from families that still have some food and divide it equally among the children.

In December 2015, I told my family that I want to get married. My family initially rejected this decision, so how would I get married during the siege and without them? Then they agreed, fearing that something would happen to me during the siege and bombing. We have a popular proverb that says, "The wedding of crazy people is in December or January."^{xl} How can the wedding be in December and in a war zone!

I always wanted my wedding to be exceptional, and so it was. The marriage and all its preparations took place in a way that was outside the norm or tradition that we were accustomed to. I started collecting some pieces of clothing that every bride should have. A friend of mine said she would take care of my makeup, and another one of my hair. She rented a wedding suit, and as for the "wedding dowry," we decided it would be food. I bought a kilo of rice for seventeen thousand Syrian

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This popular proverb is used to indicate the severity of the cold in December and January. (Author).

Pound, a kilo of bulgur for twenty thousand Syrian Pound, a head of garlic, some salt and a kilo of chickpeas and I placed them in different places in the house that my husband and I rented to live in, so that if a thief came in and stole, he would not steal everything at once. When we arrived at the house, the thief was leaving, and he had found everything. All that was left was the bag of chickpeas that he had dropped. I started picking them up from the ground while crying... Why did he take everything? If he only took what he needed, I wouldn't feel sorrow, but even salt and garlic? How difficult it is to steal food from a hungry person! My husband, brother and I were satisfied with a kilo of chickpeas for an entire week and then we had to find another way to secure food.

My new house, despite the harsh conditions, was kind to us, with a small garden that we planted with some arugula and watercress seeds. We planted them in Styrofoam boxes. This was the strategy followed by most of those who lived through the siege: planting in anything and anywhere. Obtaining seeds was the problem, as their price had risen greatly and the "blood merchants" dealing with Hezbollah were the ones smuggling them and bringing them into the siege area.

Hunger and means of survival in the siege of Madaya

Hunger began to become a daily reality. My weight was about forty kilograms. We, like other people, began searching for tree leaves or plants that we could eat. We tried olive leaf, but it was harmful and contained an astringent that made some of those who consumed it sick. As for me, since I studied agricultural engineering, I took the matter of finding an edible plant upon myself. One day, I was walking in the street and saw a cactus plant in someone's house. It was very large, and no one noticed it.

I took leaves from it that were full of a thick mucus, boiled them and I, my brother, and my husband ate them. Each of us used to imagine that the leaf juice tastes like the taste of some food. My brother says it tastes like beans, and my husband says it tastes like peas. It did not affect our health. I told some friends about it. Some tried it and were able to eat it, while it caused some stomach pain for others. We ate a meal a day from cactus leaves for days, but there was nothing left of the plant and there was no alternative to food, so my brother contacted a person from the Hezbollah forces and agreed with him to sell him his car in exchange for three kilograms of peas, two small bags of dry bread and four kilograms of rice, four kilograms of bulgur and two kilograms of infant formula. What we got was a treasure. We forgot that it was not worth anything of the value of the real car, but in any case, petrol was not available for use in the car, so that people started making petrol from black plastic cages. I do not know how, but whoever had black plastic cages became king (earned a lot of money).



A photo of food made from what was obtained after selling the car, which Fayrouz shared with us during research.

We divided the food into portions and shared it with the rest of the needy families, especially infant formula, some bulgur, and rice. We were able to last for three or four weeks with the remaining supplies we had. Here I learned that I was pregnant. Pregnancy was difficult for me in those humanitarian circumstances. I remember that some months I would just lie down all day drinking water with some sugar in it or a soup with spices and salt. This happened after the United Nations and the Red Crescent brought in some aid after the large media campaign that took place to pressure the end of the siege of Madaya. Many died of hunger. Even our neighbour who lived above us died of hunger.

Baskets of aid came in containing rice, bulgur, tomato paste, a can of oil and beans. These substances were not good for us. After months of drinking water and eating plants, these substances were heavy on the intestines, causing, for many men and women, intestinal obstruction. I was also very annoyed by it, especially since I had a previous abdominal injury, so I did not eat it. I became ill and lost all my energy, so they registered my name on the patient exchange list that began to take place within the “Four Cities Agreement.” We did not expect that they would take me, because most of the cases that were being exchanged required connections and we did not have that, but after a few days, one of responsible personnel of besieged people exchange came to us and asked me and my husband to prepare ourselves because we were going out today. The news was shocking. We did not know what to take or what to leave. I took with me a book called “Every Spy is a Prince,” which was banned in Syria and a book my father had given me about the rules of the English language. We did not even take our papers with us, as we were afraid that we would be stopped at the checkpoints or that we would be arrested.

The last farewell to Madaya and the displacement to Idlib

In April of 2016, I don't remember the exact day, I rode the bus of no return. I saw the Madaya plain. It was scorched, burned by the forces of the regime and Hezbollah for fear of the presence of rebels there. I remembered how green it was in the spring days, but many shells fell on it and burned it. For some reason I expected to see trees in it, apricot, cherry, and apple trees, but it was black like our days. They stopped us at the first checkpoint and people speaking in the Lebanese dialect boarded the bus. They took our names and told us that there was no return. They gave us cartons of juice. Then they said that this was the last chance for anyone who wanted to return to Damascus. Some people got off, but I later learned that they faced many difficulties, as everyone was sick or injured and the hospitals did not receive them quickly enough there in Damascus.

I expected that the bus would pass through Damascus and that I would bid a final farewell to it, but the convoy had another route. We went from the hill road to Homs, then Baniyas, all the way to Qalaat al-Madiq in Idlib. We stayed on the bus for a whole day. The treatment of the Red Crescent that accompanied us was not good. We were sick, injured and pregnant, but there was no aid or comfort. We did not stop anywhere. I was very tired, as I was pregnant, and my injury was still hurting me. I would stand and then sit down every few hours to move my body muscles. I remained in that state for twenty-two hours.

We arrived in Idlib, and there was the next shock. I thought we would be taken to a medical point or hospital, but they took us to a school that did not have bathrooms. The bathroom was the most important thing

for me as a pregnant and injured woman. I saw many injured people and deteriorating health conditions. I could not bear the situation. I told my husband that I wanted to go to any house that had a bathroom to at least wash my hair. We met a young man who knew my husband and he was surprised by our presence. He had no idea, so he hosted us at his house in Binnish town for three days. When we rested and went down to walk in the streets, I felt as if I was coming from another planet: Cars moving on the roads, food, vegetables and fruits in stores and the smell of grilling meat everywhere. Everything was shocking, where am I now? We walked with astonishment all over our faces. We were even going to buy a single banana, thinking that the prices were as high as they were during the siege.

We then moved to the home of a family in Binnish town whose sons had travelled and one of them was martyred, so they hosted us without taking any payment from us. As for me, I went alone to Binnish Hospital and a doctor there monitored my health condition. I had suffered from oedema in my kidneys. She prescribed medications for me and made a plan for me to eat, so that I would start eating lightly in proportion to my intestines and the state of hunger I was experiencing in Madaya. I gave birth to my first child in October 2016.

I did not tell you about the Binnish house, which hosted me in for a year and a half. It was a house within a larger family house. The owner of the house lived on the first floor with her husband, and we lived on the second floor, which is considered part of the house. Its owner was planning for this section to be for her martyred son, but fate dictated that we would live in it. The presence of that woman made me feel the safety that I had lost for years, and the kind nature of the people of the area helped me feel a sense of belonging. I didn't even want to leave it. It

was a quiet area, and its people were educated.

I rejoiced when I learned that Idlib had the Free Idlib University, which is affiliated with the Salvation Government ^{xli} It was founded by a group of university professors who defected from the universities of the Syrian regime. They initially opened specialisations such as agriculture, then informatics, medicine and nursing, i.e. specialisations that were beneficial to the region. The treatment at this university was negative, its tuition fees were high and the agriculture branch there was for males only, so I chose to go to the Free University of Aleppo, even though it was two hours away from me and I had to take two buses to get there.

I told my sister, who was studying medicine and was still in Madaya, about the universities here, so she decided to come to Idlib with her daughter, who was a year and a half, but they were arrested at a checkpoint on charges that her husband, who was martyred in 2013, was with the rebels. How exhausted and tormented I was by the arrest of my sister and her daughter, and how much money it cost my family to get her out of the security branch, where she remained for six months. My father paid about six thousand dollars to take her to Adra prison (a central prison) and about fourteen thousand dollars to release her from Adra prison a year later. As for her daughter, the SOS organisation took her from her and when my sister was released from detention, she suffered the hardships of getting her daughter back, who was three years old. The child went through a lot in that organisation and still suffers from psychological trauma resulting from the period of separation from her mother and the ill-treatment to which she was subjected to.

xli The government arose in light of the complexities experienced in the region, international interventions and internal disputes, most notably the indirect control of “Tahrir al-Sham” of all its aspects, and the continued work of the “Syrian Interim Government.” Amid conflicting considerations, between the government’s need to save Idlib and its formation by the military commander of “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham,” Abu Muhammad al-Julani, to extend his influence secretly in the region, he announced the formation of a “Salvation Government” in northern Syria, on November 2, 2017.

This explanation is excerpted from an article entitled “The Salvation Government... From establishment to control of Idlib,” Enab Baladi, January 2019. ([In Arabic](#)).



A photo of one of the evacuation buses from Madaya, which Fairouz shared with us during research.

The Syrian regime and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham both prevented me from completing my studies

After giving birth, I decided to start studying information engineering at the Free University of Aleppo, which was affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government.^{xlii} It was an acceptable option, as I dreamed of completing my studies, even if I changed my major. I used to leave my son with my husband, and go every day from Binnish to Maarat Misrin, then to Al-Dana, specifically to a place called Deir Hassan. That route took two hours of my time every day each way and the same amount of time back, but I was determined to complete it and I continued doing so until the time for the year's exams came. The first being in 2017.

At that time, my brother had come to Idlib in the last convoy from Madaya. I was happy with his safe arrival, as I was worrying about what

xlii The Syrian Interim Government, initially called the Syrian Transitional Government, is the alternative government in Syria that was formed by a group of the opposition and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. At a conference held in Istanbul on March 19, 2013, members of the National Coalition elected Ghassan Hitto as Prime Minister of the interim government of Syria. Hitto announced that the technocratic government that will be formed will be headed by between 10 and 12 ministers. The Minister of Defence was chosen by the Free Syrian Army. This explanation is excerpted from the website of the Syrian Interim Government. [\(In Arabic\)](#).

could happen to him. He was very enthusiastic and decided to open an office with his friends to document the names of displaced men and women from Madaya, but Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which controls Idlib, did not like that activity. They arrested my brother several months after his arrival and asked my husband to visit them to drink a "cup of coffee," and they arrested him as well. ^{xliii}

I remained alone, my brother and my husband in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Detention Centre. I was pregnant again, this time with twins. I was shocked by the news of my pregnancy, and I cried a lot, as I am in a difficult health and psychological situation. I did not know anything about reproductive health. Even the doctor I used to visit did not tell me anything about methods of contraception. Rather, she simply told me I will not ovulate as long as I am breastfeeding.

Even the university was closed by the authority under the pretext that there were legal violations. They stole the university's equipment and arrested some students who demonstrated in protest against the decision to close the university. The Syrian regime prevented me from completing my high education and so did Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

I am alone now in the face of all these hardships. Even the woman I was living with, and her husband decided to travel, and it became difficult for me and my child to stay with her husband at home. Moreover, my health condition was not good, as I once again suffered from oedema in my kidneys, my body had not fully recovered from everything that had happened previously.

xliii Security personnel of the Syrian government usually use this phrase, "We would like to have a cup of coffee with you," when they summon someone to the security branch and its meaning to the Syrian people is that the person who was summoned will be arrested. (Author)

Waiting for someone I don't know to take me on an unknown path

A strong military campaign had begun by the Syrian regime and its allies in the Idlib regions, with the aim of reclaiming Abu al-Duhur Airport in January 2018. Heavy bombing on Taftanaz, the regime was approaching the Saraqeb region, and the exodus from those regions began to Binnish and the rest of the Idlib regions.^{xliv} It was never acceptable for me to stay in that area with all this terror, fear and insecurity. I looked for a trafficking route to Turkey and asked my family for three thousand dollars to give to the trafficker. My son and I got into a car to take us to the “Atma” area, where the trafficking offices are. I saw a sign saying, “Guaranteed trafficking to Turkey.” I laughed to myself and wondered if there really was guaranteed trafficking route. I tried to ask the man who was giving me a ride, “Are you sure about the road?,” to which he replied: “Oh, sister, there is barely any walking on this road, just five minutes.” Shells were falling on us like rain. We arrived fine, and I waited for someone I did not know to take me on some path. I was afraid and tired, but I had to continue, because behind me was destruction and bombing and in front of me was the unknown.

I arrived at about nine o'clock at night with ten women, twelve children, a girl and two old women, one of whom could not walk and the other who was sick. I said to myself: “The trafficker may be honest. The old women cannot walk, so they chose the five-minute route,” and we walked to the trafficker's house, which was located in a border area between

xliv “Abu al-Duhur Airport fell under the control of the opposition factions in September 2015, and it was the last military centre for the regime forces in Idlib at the time.”

This explanation is excerpted from a news item entitled “Regime Forces Announce Control of Abu Al-Duhur Airport in Idlib,” Al Jazeera, January, 2018. ([In Arabic](#)).

Syria and Turkey. The plan was for a car to come and take us across the border to Turkey. I was saying that it was impossible for the trafficker to lie to us, as elderly women cannot walk long distances on foot. It later became clear to me that the presence of elderly women was part of the trafficker's deception against us. A small truck came, in which we were crammed with our children until we reached an agricultural area. They put us in and said that we had to walk and not make any sound. The trafficker even distributed sleeping medication to us to give to our children, but I refused to give it to my child, as I do not know what that medicine was. We sat in agricultural land with olive trees, I looked around and did not find the elderly women among us.

The trafficker told us that we would walk for five minutes, and another car would come to pick us up. The five minutes extended into five hours, during which we walked on an uphill road and ploughed soil. I was very tired, and I told the trafficker that I was sick and pregnant, but he did not listen to me. After the ploughed fields, there was jumping off a high wall. After the wall, the road became steep, and the difficulty increased. I had to protect my son from the slope and thorns and stay with the group. I slipped and fell into a ditch. I was exhausted. I suppressed my pain and got out of it. No one paid attention to me, and they left me alone to face my fate. They tried to take my son away from me to help me, but I was afraid and did not accept. I only gave them my bag that I carried on my back and then they stole it later.



An abstract art of the condition of Fayrouz and her son during the trafficking trip to
Turkey

We arrived at four in the morning to an area full of frozen water. It was February 2018, and it was very cold. The trafficker pointed us to a place with lights and said it was Reyhaniyya city. Here a Turkish officer came with dogs and took money from the trafficker. The children were afraid from the dogs, and they started crying and screaming. I also started crying from the severity of the cold, fatigue and oppression.

We walked until we reached a dark house in Reyhaniyya, as we were not allowed to turn on the lights so that the Turkish police would not find out about us. The trafficker's main concern was to contact the new group arriving to tell them that we had arrived fine, and he asked us to give a certificate to them. I couldn't stand the situation at that moment, and I started speaking loudly, insulting them and cursing them. They asked me to remain silent more than once, but I could not. I released the repression and oppression in my chest.

I then went to the house of a family I know in Reyhaniyya and stayed for less than a day while the trafficker obtained for us fake "Kemlik" Turkish residency permits. Then we boarded a bus and stayed on it for twenty-four hours until we arrived in Istanbul and paid two hundred and fifty dollars. They put us on a ferry that took me to Bursa, all without any rest or food, just a bottle of water for me and my son. I arrived in Bursa and was greeted by my little brother who was living there. I hugged him tightly and gave him my son and said to him: "Take care of me, I no longer have any strength."

Between residence and birth... between Mersin and Bursa

My brother left the youth hostel he was living in, and we rented a small house together in a popular neighbourhood. I bought simple things: Two plates, two spoons and some basic utensils. We later saved some money from my brother's salary to complete some furniture and kitchen utensils. I was relieved to be with my brother, but I was tired and shocked by everything. I now had to start from scratch in a new place and the worry of my brother and my husband who were detained by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham weighed heavily on me. I continued to communicate with many people in Idlib and they gave me false promises that they would soon be released from the prison.

I had to think about my current situation, as I was in the seventh month of pregnancy, and I had to move to obtain a residence permit for me in Bursa, but when I went to start the transaction, I discovered that my previous residence permit that I had obtained when I came with my father to Mersin was still valid, and this meant that I had to go to Mersin to obtain a replacement. I went to Mersin and obtained a copy of the Kemlik (temporary protection card), but during that period a decision was issued stipulating that we, as Syrians, had to obtain a travel permit to move between Turkish cities, so I began to process the travel permit to Bursa and obtained it. All of this required a lot of money, which I didn't have any of it.

My mental state was very deteriorated during that period, as I had not yet recovered from the losses I experienced, from the siege, displace-

ment and the trafficking trip to Turkey. Add to that my health condition, which was not stable at all, and which was affected by the pregnancy and my anxiety for my husband and brother. I went to a maternity hospital in Bursa city to book an appointment for a caesarean section, but they refused and asked me to give birth naturally. I explained to them repeatedly that I was forbidden from giving birth naturally because of my previous birth and because of my injury and after much back and forth, they agreed. Then they told me that it was not permissible for me to give birth in a hospital in Bursa as long as my residence was in Mersin, and here my health condition began to deteriorate, and I suffered from frequent bleeding. My Turkish neighbour intervened and spoke with the hospital and convinced them that my condition was difficult and that sending me to give birth alone in Mersin was an inhumane act.

My beautiful twins were born. They were in poor health, one weighing two kilograms and the other a little less. At the hospital, I was accompanied by a Syrian woman whom I had met once in Jobar area in Syria. She stayed with me for three full days. How difficult and cruel those days were; that I had recently given birth in a place where some nurses deliberately neglected me because I was Syrian. One of them even asked my companion to clean the room because she said, “I don’t clean Syrian women’s rooms.” The treatment was distasteful and racist, and I had not yet learned the Turkish language, so I was unable to respond or demand my rights. After I left the hospital, I pledged to myself that I would help any woman in need of care. I helped many women that I knew or did not know. I volunteered to go with them and sometimes slept in the hospital until their condition improved. I had mastered the terminology used there, just out of my desire to ensure that no other Syrian woman would be subjected to what I was subjected to.

My twins developed jaundice and I took them to hospital to treat them until their condition improved. At the end of June 2018, I received news of my husband's release from prison ... finally some happy news. My husband came out shocked from everything that happened to him, and from his awareness of the difficulties of smuggling that I endured to reach Turkey, and from the fact that I gave birth to twins. I decided to go with him and my children to Idlib. I stayed with him for a week there, until he received a threat that he had to leave Idlib immediately. We headed to Afrin in Aleppo. We first rented a house owned by a Kurdish professor who had decided to move to Aleppo for many reasons. It was difficult to find a house to rent from its owner. During that period, unfortunately, the armed leaders were taking people's homes in Afrin in a shameful and ugly way. That professor was reassured about us and knew that we did not belong to any faction, and he was comfortable with that. He treated us with all kindness and paid rent to him every six months while he was settled in Aleppo.

My brother, my mother's visit and my return to Reyhaniyya

I stayed in Afrin for six months, after which I decided to return to Turkey, but a week before my travel we learned that the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham had issued a death sentence against my brother on 10/12/2018. It was shocking news that we got from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. I wanted to go to Idlib, but there was a high probability that I would be arrested to lure my husband, whom the Commission also requested and threatened with arrest.

I told my mother about my brother's situation. She was in Damascus.

She could not bear the news and decided to come to Idlib. In fact, she came through an arduous journey from Damascus to Aleppo, Afrin, then Idlib. She remained for a full month in Idlib trying her best to get my brother out and overturn the death sentence. My mother was finally able to see my brother and check on him and then she returned to Damascus. In the midst of all this, I was able to meet her after a long separation for only one day. She had not met my children yet, so I was happy to see her, but she was tired and worried, and her focus was on getting my brother out of detention and ensuring his safety.

I could not stay in Afrin, as the fighting between the factions there was intense. My husband could not accompany me to Turkey because of the difficulty of smuggling, so I went with my children to Reyhaniyya. My brother, who was in Bursa, had returned to Syria because he could not bear the harsh working conditions and treatment. I stayed in Reyhaniyya alone with my children for a full six months, during which I worked in an orphanage in exchange for living in one of the rooms there.

I was teaching the children there. How difficult their situation was. Most of them were orphans. They were in a difficult psychological state and suffered from bedwetting. Their mothers were with them, the widows that no one wanted to deal with. They were patient and their religion was important to them in their lives. Psychological support programs were not common at that stage there, I do not know whether the situation has changed now or not. I learned a lot from that experience. I began to understand the conditions of women more, and to recognise society's injustices towards them, especially widows. They were an unpopular group and were stigmatised because their women ran after any help or assistance. No one wanted to understand why and how they lived their days or how difficult it was to be mothers of orphaned children in a situation of war and conflict.

As for me, I needed a job to earn some money, as my work only provided me with housing and food. In addition, my children only owned... white document ^{xlv} which has become illegal to deal with and I have a picture of an old Kemlik from Mersin and when a package of decisions was issued requiring every person to be present exclusively in his state, otherwise he would be deported, I was forced to go with my children to Mersin and start again from scratch.

Loneliness, harassment and blackmail... **But I did not stand idly by**

I am now in Mersin in 2020, with my young children in a small house or as they call it a “studio” that lacks sunlight. I started looking for a job. It made me sad that I had to ask my family for money in the beginning while they were in a difficult financial situation and were moving from one house to another, but I had no other solution.

I was afraid in Mersin; I was afraid of loneliness and my anxiety about dying alone increased. This feeling has accompanied me since I immigrated to Idlib. I was afraid of the call to prayer in cases of death, especially when they said that the person’s identity was unknown, and I was afraid of reading epitaphs. These events stimulated an internal fear that I tried to hide, that I would die far from my home and my family. My fear increased in Mersin, as I was completely alone, in a country where I did not know the language and where I did not know anyone. If I died, I would leave behind three children with no relatives.

xlv A document granted by the Immigration Department in Turkey before the delivery of the yellow Kemlik, which is considered a temporary protection card for Syrian men and women. (Fayrouz)

I applied for many jobs, and they asked me for an interview for one of them, the job was as an editor for a news platform. I had no experience in this field, but I was confident in my ability to learn quickly. They agreed to hire me, so I started working and quickly learned how to use WordPress and began doing some designs as well, as I learned that in the few months, I spent in IT engineering at the University of Aleppo. The beginning was good, but the platform's editor-in-chief did not like that my relationship with him was only professional. His view of me was that I was a lonely and weak woman and that I would do what he wanted from me. I could not stand the verbal and written harassment I was receiving from him, so I left the job, but I was not free from him even after I did so. I received sometimes two hundred calls from him in a single day and I ignored them all. Then he started blackmailing me with pictures of me that he got when I made a mistake, and I gave him my email and password when he connected me to the editorial platform. I forgot to change the password and he had access to my email, accessed my mobile phone and blackmailed me with all of this. I was very afraid and psychologically tired, and I started taking a sedative. I did not remain silent. I went to the mayor of Mersin and to the police, but they did not care much and ignored the case because I was Syrian.

I contacted a lawyer and had to pay the sum of five thousand Turkish liras that I took from my family after I told them the whole story. The whole treatment changed when my story became with the lawyer who collected all the evidence on a flash drive. We went together to the police headquarters and filed the report. They summoned the editor-in-chief and imprisoned him. His family communicated with my family a lot to get me to drop the report, but my family's support and trust in me, along with my husband, gave me great comfort. I do not think of this annoying story, knowing that the case is still on-going, but he pledged

not to approach me or communicate with me. I conquered him, despite often feeling weak.

I hated staying in Mersin after everything that happened, I went back to look for work and applied for jobs outside Mersin. I was accepted for one of them in Antakya. I was very happy, and I went to rent a house for me and my children there, but after that I did not get the opportunity to work. How tiring it was to feel lost, insecure, and endlessly fatigued. My husband contacted a family he knew in Urfa, and they advised him to move there, where living was cheaper and the social atmosphere acceptable. I moved to Urfa in 2020 and with every start I tried to be stronger. I rented a house that consisted of three rooms with plenty of sunlight. I had not previously realised the importance of that light in our lives until our bitter journey through dark homes and places. The house overlooked a beautiful, quiet garden and most of the residents in the neighbourhood were refugees, like me, so it was easy for us to understand each other's situations. In that region, I felt close to Syria, to my country, to the beautiful customs and traditions and the chivalry of the young men and women of Syria. My husband's condition improved, and he was able to reach Urfa after a few months.

When I breathed a sigh of relief, I took the "YÖS" exam, which is the entrance exam to Turkish universities for foreigners, based on mathematics and logic, which is required to apply to the university. I succeeded and now I am studying political science. This year, I was ranked ninth in my class.

Leave me somewhere with some stability and you'll see what I can do [laughter].

Who am I now and what is my relationship with the places?

I am now a confident woman and I have a great ambition that I want to achieve. I have a goal to master English language, graduate from university and become a capable researcher. For the first time, I feel that I am able to set a goal and then strive for it, after the difficult circumstances in previous years forced me to go along with them just to save myself.

I travel to my university in Mardin and return to Urfa, to my simple and small house. I feel comfortable in this house, knowing that it does not resemble my family's house in terms of space, furniture, comfort or warmth, but it is a house that brings me and my family together. I began to create a new path for my life, studying and working. My husband cannot work because he does not have a residency permit yet. I feel a sense of belonging and gratitude at the same time, as I am able to start over.

The state of stability that we created for ourselves in Urfa did not last. My child was in first grade and no government school would accept him. It was difficult to send him to a private school due to the high tuition fees. My husband repeatedly tried to go to the immigration department to obtain papers, but their treatment was so bad that they tore up the paper that they had given him as a preliminary paper for issuing the Kemlik. Thus, the circumstances presented us with two options that had no third: Either I return to Mersin, and thus lose my university because it is too far from the place, or I move to Mardin, where the city administration was still issuing residency permits for Syrian refugees so I can complete my studies. Mardin was the best option. I prepared my papers and applied to the Immigration Department. This time I did not need

brokers, I knew the law I spoke the language, albeit partially. I waited a few minutes, which is unusual in other states, as we used to pay money just to reserve a seat and stand for hours for that. I entered, submitted my papers and the employee told me a few minutes later: “Your residence and the residence of the children have been transferred and you can book an appointment for your husband.” I looked at him and said: “Just like that?!!” I couldn’t stop myself from crying. He asked me in surprise. I told him: “Thank you for treating me like a human being,” and I left. All the way I was thinking about everything that had happened to me. In fact, any treatment I received was not humane in any chapter of my journey. I moved to Mardin, and my husband obtained a residence permit with dignity.

How can justice be served for both me and the place?

My family repaired our home as much as possible. They rent it in the summer and live in it in the winter. It has become a source of livelihood, after it was a home for family, love and affection. I look at its pictures now and I feel that the house has aged. Houses have souls like ours, they feel, grow old and become sad. My family’s house is tired and showing signs of age. How I long to hold the door’s knocker to announce my arrival. My father brought it from Bulgaria at the time and it was in the shape of a human face. Every corner of that house has a story. I miss sleeping in it and talking with my sister in her room. Our relationship with places is strange. Sometimes I feel that it may be stronger than my relationship with people. I feel that my home wants to embrace me, wants to cry on my shoulder and for me to cry on its shoulder.

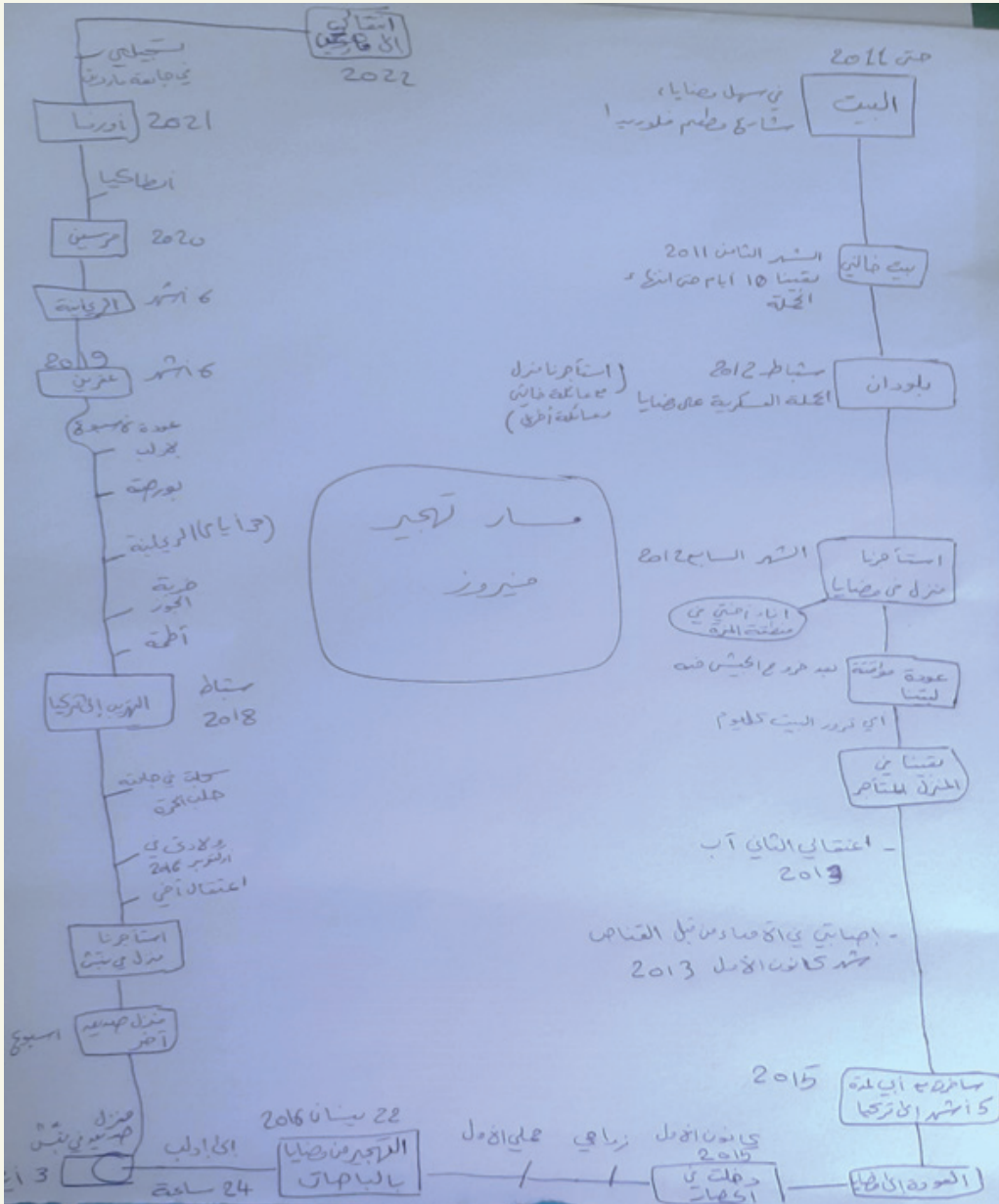
I always remember it and it never leaves my mind. Whenever I hear Fayrouz and Nasri Shams al-Din (singers), I remember my home, my family, my brothers and sisters and I smile. (O distant mountain, behind you are our beloved ones) ^{xlvi}This song is very similar to our situation.

The justice that I see or wish for may differ from the justice sought by others. As for me, we want to return to our land, for the political regime to change and for its leaders to be held accountable, for us not to be afraid of any security forces prosecutions. But will this happen? I fear that we will return after political change and that we will live, for example, for a year without fear of raids or persecution. Then something will change, and we the cycle will start again. I have no confidence that what happened will not be repeated.

I want a place to settle with my children now. We are tired of moving between houses. I can adapt to it, but my children are greatly affected whenever we move from one place to another. I recently discovered that my son has a psychological disorder related to changing places. He feels very tired psychologically and his memories remain attached to the previous place. It is very easy here in Turkey for the owner of the house to come and ask us to move out after weeks, always under the pretext of one of his children getting married. Even if our contract is annual, we have no choice but to leave and move to another place.

My children and I hate new houses. We don't want a new house anymore. I wish my children could see the home I grew up in. I want to go back to that place; nothing can replace that feeling. I am grateful for many of the cities I lived in after displacement: Binnish, Reyhaniyyeh and Urfa, but all of them are temporary links with no history.

The path of Fayrouz's displacement until the date of telling her story



I want my name to be

Al-Dimashqiya...

Story telling date: August 2022

Are you saying that I am illiterate?

The place and I when we were together

Me at the beginning of 2011

The bombing in February and the first displacement

The journey of displacement and exodus began

I used to visit Lebanon as a tourist, but now I am a displaced person

I was twenty women at the same time

I am tired between attempts to settle down and attempts to travel

A house for preserving dignity

Homes have souls that go away when their owners go

The path of the displacement of Al-Dimashqiya until the date of telling her story

Are you saying that I am illiterate?

I am a woman from Zabadani. I used to live in the centre of the country. I was born and lived in Zabadani. Then, when I was in the first grade, we moved to Damascus to the Al-Midan area where my father worked. I lived my childhood and adolescence between the areas of Al-Midan and Al-Salihiyah, where my mother's family is. Then I returned to Zabadani when my mother got me married when I was seventeen and my whole family returned with me to Zabadani. ^{xlvi}

I was an outstanding student in school and loved studying very much. My science teacher used to tell me that I would become a scientist specialising in atomic studies and that she would visit me in the building where I would work to remind me that she had predicted that. That teacher refrained from speaking to me for three months when I was in the eleventh grade, as she knew that I was engaged and would soon be married. She refused to talk to me or to mark the study and exam papers

^{xlvi} Al-Dimashqiya refrained from mentioning the address of her home in Zabadani to protect what remained of her family there. (Author)

for me. She would look at me and say: “I will not waste my effort on you. You will get married. You have ruined yourself and wasted your future.” She even called my family crazy, especially since our financial situation was good. She did not accept their decision to get me married early as I was not a financial burden on them. When she said these words to me, I would return home sad and angry and would not see my fiancé for a while, but he later became my husband and the father of my five daughters.

I got married and moved to Zabadani to live with my husband. My mother decided to move in with me as well because she knows that I am a child and unable to manage my home alone. I started having my daughters, one after the other. One day, my second daughter was in the second grade of primary school, and they distributed cards to the students to write the names of the mother and father and the profession of each of them. My daughter came and told me that the mother of one of the two students in the same seat with her is a doctor and the mother of the other is an engineer, while my daughter wrote that her mother is illiterate. The situation shocked me. I, who used to be one of the most diligent students. I was the one who taught all my daughters and followed them in their lessons. Am I illiterate in their eyes?

I began searching for private institutes in Zabadani to offer the baccalaureate in its literary branch after a break from study of seventeen years, that is, at the age of thirty-five. I was rejected from all institutes because I was married. There was no married woman in Zabadani who was repeating her baccalaureate. This was not normal, but rather reprehensible, as married women should not be mixed with single women. I was received by one institute that had recently started and whose management was seeking to attract female students. I told them that I had

three conditions and they agreed to them: I want to sit in the first seat, and I do not want anyone next to me. I will perform prayer on time, and I will not attend geography, history or civics classes as I do not have time for that.

I cried a lot in the first days and months. I did not remember anything of my previous knowledge. I felt that the educational curriculum was beyond my capacity. I also suffered from societal pressure. I used to hear the phrase, “After her hair turned grey, they brought her to school.”^{xlvi} A lot, or I should be with my children and at home, not studying. But I continued to go to the institute every day and my husband supported me as he picked me up in his car. I also received support and pampering from my family and mother-in-law.

The month before the exams, I decided to isolate myself in a room on the second floor of my house, receiving only food prepared by one of my daughters. I took the exam, passed and was first in the institute. I went to my daughter and said to her: “Are you going to call me illiterate?”

I wanted to study journalism, I wanted to write and express many of the issues and ideas that occupied my mind, but my sister was opposed to that and continued to convince my husband that this profession was of no use in Syria. My second favourite option was English Literature. My eldest daughter and I studied this specialisation together. We were in different years but in the same college. I was at university for eight years. I gave birth to my fifth daughter during my studies. But I did not graduate because I had two modules remaining, for which I could not take the exam due to the events in Syria.

I want to tell you something. After I passed my baccalaureate degree and

^{xlvi} A popular proverb that refers to a person who does something, such as studying, that is not appropriate for age, according to society's opinion. “A popular saying that refers to a person who engages in an activity, such as studying, that is considered inappropriate for their age, according to societal norms.” (Author)

I was the first married woman to study at a private institute in Zabadani, most institutes opened a special section for married women. I remember that forty women registered the following year.



An abstract art representing Al-Dimashqiya while she was studying at the institute

The place and I when we were together

When I got married and moved with my husband to Zabadani, we lived in my husband's family's old house, and they moved to a new house. The house was small, with two rooms and a main hall. Its location was beautiful because it was on the main street. As a very sociable person, I loved seeing everyone and greeting them and them greeting me every day. But the roof of the house was thin and, in the summer, it was scorching. I spent many summer days at my parents' or my husband's parents' house.

We renovated the house years later, it had three floors, a floor for girls with a "terrace" (balcony), a floor for guests and the first floor for the family. I loved it very much, especially after the renovation. My favourite place was the main corridor, where there were plants and fragrant scents. I planted Rubber plants and lemon seedlings which I used to take from my mother's home, "The Lemon Queen." Before the events began, we were still doing the final touches of painting the doors and other things, then the war came and destroyed the house and its doors.

With all my love for my home, my family's home is my favourite. I spent many days there, even when I was married. He loved the gatherings that were held there, the most famous of which was Friday." Harraa' Bi'sba'ou" ^{xlix}My mother, a Damascene, as I told you, used to cook this food in a large "pot" because she distributed it to every house in her neighbourhood. I love kneading" Kashk "at my mother's, we invite the women to help us, and we prepare food and fruits for them. We would knead about thirty kilograms of the kashk and place it on the roof of the house to dry. I love my family's home very much. Yes, I am attached to it more than my home. My relationship with my family was stronger

xlix

A famous dish in Syria, especially in the city of Damascus. (Author)

than my relationship with my household. I loved them very much and still do.

In my family's house, a big field, a piece of paradise. I used to go there every evening on foot with my family. But after I learned to drive following my success in the baccalaureate, I bought a car and started taking everyone there in my car. My brother built a place there that could accommodate our gatherings and we had lunch there every Friday, among the water streams and in the shade of the grape vine.



An abstract art of women gathering in the house of Al-Dimashqiya's mother to make
kashk

I was treated very unfairly in the beginning when I got married and moved to Zabadani. Everything changed in my life, from a girl who was only interested in learning and studying and who knew nothing about housework, to a married woman who had to manage an entire house and do all the work. I was broken. My daughter's words "I am illiterate" woke me up and I studied and excelled. I became an example of a strong woman. Then I owned a car and started going wherever I wanted. I became strong despite everything. I was also working. I wanted to help my husband. I think I wanted to support him, as I did not give birth to a boy for him to help him. I wanted to be that boy and I wanted to be an active person. I gave private English lessons to girls in the morning and afternoon, and to male students in the evening. I was never afraid of the other sex, and I never allowed any of the men or young men to say anything to me in the street. I was strong and the students were the same age as my daughters, so I had no problem teaching them. Some public schools would also call me to teach when some teachers were absent for a few days. I was earning about twenty-five thousand Syrian pounds a month, which was not a small amount back then.

I spent many summer days at my parents' or my husband's parents' house

Harraa' BÍ'sba'ou

Kashk

Rubber plant. Lemon seedlings

My favourite place was the main corridor, with the plants and the scents.

I love my family's home very much. Yes, I am attached to it more than my home

In my family's house, a big field, a piece of paradise

I was broken. My daughter's words "I am illiterate" woke me up, and I studied and excelled.

I became strong despite everything

Me at the beginning of 2011

Before the events of that year began, I remember a kidnapping incident of a child from Zabadani (Hani Burhan) in the first months.¹ Students came out of schools every day to demand the rights of the child Hani and hold those who committed the crime of kidnapping and killing him accountable. They gathered daily, carried banners and marched from the “Al Mahatta” area to the “Al Saraya” area. This act was dangerous for them and new for us: a student demonstration next to the station, that area full of government service centres. The school principal asked the teachers to try and prevent the students from carrying out these demonstrations by walking with them after the end of school hours and taking each of them to their homes to ensure that they do not gather. But somehow the students would gather after that and hold demonstrations demanding the rights of their friend and colleague Hani.

Then, in the third month, the Daraa revolutionary events took place, following which many demonstrations took place in Zabadani. One time, as I recall, the demonstrators carried olive branches in solidarity with Daraa people. But the peaceful period of the demonstrations did not last long. In one of the demonstrations, someone shot a young man from Zabadani, as well as a member of the security forces. I am certain that whoever did this had the goal of arming those demonstrations. I do not know whether they were internal or external agendas. We were all afraid. Intellectuals from Zabadani went out to the media to warn

¹ The kidnapping and killing of the child “Hani Burhan” turned into a social issue that aroused public opinion in Syria, which prompted a group of his sympathisers to establish several groups on the social networking site “Facebook,” the most famous of which are: “We demand that the negligent officials in the case of the killing of the child Hani Burhan be held accountable.” The group of the child martyr Hani Burhan - Together for retribution against the killers.”

This explanation is excerpted from a report entitled “The Abduction and Murder of the Child “Hani” ... A crime shakes all parts of Syria,” Nawara, Nawarat electronic newspaper, March 2011. ([In Arabic](#)).

against taking arms, and some of them noted that whoever carries a rifle today will find a tank at the door of his house tomorrow, and this is what actually happened. I was very upset when some young men took up weapons and I realised that the course of the revolution would change. I would then perform actions that I would describe as humanitarian, helping the wives of the detainees who were pregnant and about to give birth or helping the families of detainees and the poor and their children with food aid and money.

Daily raids and military campaigns began on Zabadani, and they were the harshest. Military and security raids took place in one of the last months of 2011 and lasted for fifteen days. The regime forces prevented the people from leaving. The tank was lined up at the door of my house. The men hid for fear of arrest and we women went out to bring the household's needs.

I used to share what I cooked with regime soldiers who were stationed near my house. They were young and sleeping in the cold. I cooked all kinds of kibbeh for them, and you can" even imagine how appetising that kibbeh I cooked was! I sent them blankets and food more than once. My house was still full of food and supplies, and I was able to do this.

One of my daughters fell ill one night. I told my husband that I would take her to a doctor's house, but he refused and said that I was crazy, because going out in that situation at night was a form of insanity. He was right, as electricity was cut off in all areas and there were tanks and barriers in every neighbourhood. I insisted and said I was going no matter what. One of the daughters offered to accompany me and her sick sister. I refused and told her, "If something happens, there is no need for all of us to die, just me and your sister." A soldier asked me at the first

checkpoint where I was going. I told him that my daughter is sick and asked him to come with me to help me at the rest of the checkpoints. He said to me: “Don’t talk too much. Is there any doctor to receive you now?” So, I told him that I was going to a doctor’s house in the villa area. He let me pass. I stopped at a checkpoint every five minutes. I was very afraid when I saw the Al-Mahatta square Full of tanks, I was pretending to be strong. “masculine”^{li} but the female inside me was very terrified. Any mistake on my part, a wrong path, a wrong light from my car would cost my life and that of my daughter. I reached the doctor, he gave me the necessary medications, and I returned at night using the same route.

li An adjective given to a woman who performs actions that society classifies as belonging to men and does not recognise the characteristics related to the personality she performs, regardless of sex or gender, such as carrying heavy objects, playing in trees, showing strength, not being afraid, speaking loudly and showing opinion in public spaces, etc. A woman may also apply it to herself. The term used to describe a woman who engages in actions classified by society as typically associated with men and are not recognized as characteristics related to one’s personality regardless of gender or social type, such as lifting heavy objects, climbing trees, demonstrating strength, showing fearlessness, speaking loudly, expressing opinions in public spaces, etc., and may be self-applied by the woman as well. (Author)



An abstract art of Al-Dimashqiya's condition as she tried to take her daughter to the doctor at night

The bombing in February and the first displacement

Events escalated between the two parties with the start of the regime's campaign against Zabadani in February 2012. A very violent campaign, as a result of which most of the people of Zabadani left their homes. Shells were raining down on us from every direction and my house was in the front facing the tanks.

On an unforgettable day, my three daughters, my husband and I were at home, and my two eldest daughters, who were studying at the university in Damascus, were in an apartment that I rented for them out of fear of them coming and going in these terrifying conditions. We heard a strong blast and saw an intense light in our home. We all ran and hid in my room. I asked my husband to turn off the electricity to prevent the house from burning, thinking that the electrical box had exploded. While my husband was going down the stairs, something else caught fire in front of him. We knew that it was not an electrical box. It was a large shell that had fallen into one of our neighbours' houses. We all cried from shock and fear, but we had to act quickly, as the artillery was opposite my home and could drop its shell at any moment. Our only refuge was my husband's family's house opposite us, with a street standing between us. It is safer because it is on the opposite side of the shelling. I stood at the door of my house, while my mother-in-law was at the door of her house. My mission was to send the girls to her, to cross the street, so my mother-in-law would meet them and bring them into her house. To do that, I had to take advantage of the military's preparation period for the incoming shell to open the door of the house and send the girls,

one girl after another, one girl between one shell and another.

I stayed in my home, as my husband was able to go first to help the girls, for half an hour, in the dark, as the electricity had been cut off for months, and the periods of its outages increased during the bombing. “I said Shahadah”^{lii} after my husband insisted on me running to them, I crossed the street and reached their house. We stayed at my husband’s family’s house for five or six days. A large part of my home was destroyed, and it was difficult to return to it. The shells were still falling. Our family was big and many of our neighbours sought refuge with us, so we became about thirty people in one place. One of the shells fell in the kitchen garden while we were preparing food, so we all ran inside, except for my father-in-law. He did not move from the sofa on which he was lying. He refused to move. I was surprised by his behaviour at that time. Then my husband, my daughters and I decided to go to the Wadi Ghazal area in Bludan, which was the first exodus.

We went to Bludan in my car, with my sister-in-law with us. The destination was to one of the villas in Bludan. My husband called its owner, a friend of his, and asked him to let us stay there for a while. There were a large number of us in one car, and the road was difficult. A car was in front of us to show us the road and make sure of our ability to cross. We arrived there. I remember how cold it was. It was in February, and our areas are very cold, as you know, at this time. There were no winter covers, as people from the GCC rent this villa in the summer and leave it in the winter. There were no covers, carpets or heaters. How we endured the cold! We covered ourselves with summer blankets and slept on the ground, as there were only two sofas available.

The cold and hunger were more severe than the bombing. What made

lii Meaning, she said: I bear witness that there is no god, but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, which is what she must say as a Muslim when she feels her time approaching. (Author)

matters worse was a shell landing next to the villa, knowing that Bludan was not targeted, but the regime knew that the people of Zabadani were taking their women and children to Bludan, so they were closely monitored. We could not turn on the lights in the house or the lights in the car at night. Most of the people of Bludan were not happy with the displacement of the people of Zabadani to their area, as they wanted it to remain safe... We were just asking that they treat us humanely. When the shell landed next to the villa, my daughter, who was in the tenth grade, had a panic attack. Her heartbeat increased and it became difficult for her to breathe. We took her in our car without turning on the lights. It was night, and we suffered a lot until we reached a doctor at his house. He treated her then, but since that day my daughter has had neuritis. She later got married and gave birth to a child with the same disease. We did not find a treatment for her, even at the American University of Beirut.



Abstract Art of Al-Dimashqiya smuggling her daughters into her mother-in-law's house
on the opposite side for fear of shells

And the journey of displacement and movement began

We remained in Wadi Ghazal for a week, then a truce was declared, so we returned to our home in Zabadani, and its condition was shocking. All the windows were broken, but I had to adapt. The truce did not last long, because violations started from both sides and shells returned to rain on us from time to time. I decided to go to Damascus. We rented a house near my maternal grandfather's house in Al-Muhajireen area. My mother and my sister-in-law went with me, and we stayed there for a month, until a second truce was declared, so we returned to Zabadani. But the bombing started again a few days later; so, in April or May 2012, we moved to a house that my sister rented in Bludan, and we lived in it together.

The bombing intensified in Zabadani, and the situation became very dangerous for the remainder of our extended family there, so they all came to Bludan. I want to tell you that I was not proud of myself as to the way we got houses in Bludan.

At first, we contacted the owner and asked for his permission to host a family for a short time, but even when he granted us that, we still had to break the locks to enter because we did not have keys; but when the bombing intensified, we broke into some apartments in the same building even without having permission. True, it was an emergency measure, but I didn't like it.

My family and my in-laws including my husband's sister moved out, went to a villa that my husband had worked on building in the nineties. He called its owner and got his permission. We stayed there for three months. It was equipped with everything; it even had a swimming pool on the third floor. There were also binoculars that we sometimes used to see the bombing sites in Zabadani and to check on our home. We could see all of Zabadani from that villa. It was difficult to see your city being bombed daily while you were unable to do anything but protect yourself. During that period, truces were called from time to time, for a period of one day, and sometimes for hours. During those times, we would go quickly to our home to get some things and return to Bludan before the truce ended and sometimes, we would walk among the shells. So, we stayed there through the "Lesser Eid/Eid al-Fitr" and then on Eid al-Adha, all of our extended families came over and spent time with us. We were not completely safe. Sometimes bullets would reach us, so we would hide until the clashes stopped.

How afraid I was in those days! Bludan area was safer than Zabadani, but some people there were uncomfortable with our presence. I heard a lot of obscene and hurtful talk, especially when a young Christian man from Bludan died after being hit by a shell. They laid all the blame on the people of Zabadani and demanded that they leave Bludan. I was concerned about my daughters and afraid of being raped, that was my obsession all the time. Yes, I am a strong woman, but deep inside I was terrified that something might happen to my daughters. I got this fear from my mother. She was always talking about this topic, getting angry with me if I sent my daughters on a trip and always reminded me that they could be raped anytime. I have always tried to let my daughters have freedom in their lives, but my mother's obsessions could make their way into my mind. So, I watched them wherever they went and

grew concerned about them. I even often eavesdropped on my daughters when they were playing with their friends at home. My mother instilled this fear in me since I was little. Even though I had never been exposed to anything bad, these concerns have haunted me. Hence, how could I calm down amidst this completely unsafe situation? So, prompted by fear, I asked my husband to take us to Lebanon, especially after the bombing reached Bludan on Eid al-Adha, and my two young daughters started crying again, repeating the same sentence they used to say in Zabadani: “We don’t want to die”.

My husband agreed, he took my two young daughters in my car and went to Lebanon to investigate the situations while I stayed back with my other three daughters in Bludan. Twenty days later, we joined him there – one of our daughters and myself – while the other two remained back in Bludan: Daughter number three was in the baccalaureate class and my eldest daughter was in college. I didn’t mention something to you. I did to my eldest daughter what my mother had done to me. I don’t know why. I married her off at the age of seventeen. But now I have changed a lot. I do not accept any marriages before the age of twenty-five or twenty-six.

She gave birth to a baby girl and had her for six days. Then, her husband’s family took the baby from her and divorced her. My daughter still hoped to see her baby girl. My eldest daughter could later see her daughter, but the child refused her, as she did not know her at all. My daughter called and said she wanted to join us, that was in July of 2013.

It was difficult for the two daughters to be alone in the villa, so we traded places. My sister-in-law moved in with her four boys to the villa and my two daughters moved out to the building where my husband’s parents were - yes, my sister-in-law has four boys, and I did not give birth

to a single boy... I have a lot of complications in my life...

I used to visit Lebanon as a tourist, but now I am a displaced person. I gathered some necessary items and put them in bags. My daughter and I tried to go through the Takiya checkpoint and the investigation began: Why are you going to Lebanon? Where are your other daughters? Where is your husband? Then, one of the officers told me that he knew my husband and his place of work as well; he even mentioned the name of the family my husband worked for in Lebanon. I became very afraid and the idea of being arrested and raped started to take over my thoughts. He continued his investigation, speaking with us in a mocking tone, but at the end of the day he allowed us to pass. We boarded a Micro (small bus) and headed to Lebanon. The driver wanted to start a conversation with me more than once, but I rebuffed him and told him: "Leave me alone, for God's sake." My feelings were mixed, intertwined and contradictory... Am I happy to get out of that miserable situation? Or should I cry over a homeland that is no longer mine? Am I in a dream or is this the harsh reality? I left my home, I left Zabadani; that was the truth I faced myself with along the way. How many times I crossed that road to Lebanon from one summer to another one, I used to go there as a tourist. but now, what am I? a displaced person? A refugee? And for how long? I arrived at the house that my husband rented in the Qaraoun area in Lebanon. It was equipped with a used washing machine and refrigerator, but they were in a good condition. I looked at the sofas and how worn out they were; I got so angry and started shouting that we should replace them immediately. Deep inside me, I was aware that I was relieving myself of feelings of anger, fear and frustration, especially when bearing in mind that I left two daughters back in Syria alone in exceptional circumstances. At the same time, I was relieved that I had reached my husband. He had started working straight away in the construction

workshops of the family that the soldier mentioned to me at the checkpoint, and he rented that house.

I can say that my second tragedy began when I moved to Lebanon. I will tell you shortly about my work, my achievements and my daughters, but the tragedy comes from the humiliation I felt here. They say: "It is easier to be humiliated by a relative than by a stranger." No, this proverb is not true. I was subjected to humiliation by my people in Syria, at the checkpoints and in Bludan, during the bombing and during our displacement from one place to another, but denigration and humiliation here are of another kind. Some people make you feel like an insect, worthless no matter what you do. I married my daughters off in Lebanon and I have three Lebanese in-laws and three grandchildren, but I say this in front of them and I have said it at my work more than once. I cannot remain silent and pretend that life is rosy here.

Sometimes I think differently; do they have the right to look at us in this ugly way? I wonder, if I were one of the people of Bludan or if I were Lebanese, would I treat the people of Zabadani and the Syrian people with contempt as many men and women did to me? I don't know.

..... It was the first displacement

How could we felt! We covered ourselves with summer blankets and slept on the floor

We broke into some apartments in the same building without permission. It was an emergency measure, but I didn't like it.

It was difficult to see your city being bombed daily while you were unable to do anything but protect yourself

"We don't want to die"

Am I happy to get out of that miserable situation? Or should I cry over a homeland that is no longer mine?

I was twenty women at the same time

I took my daughters to enrol them at school. They asked me there about my work and studies. One week, they contacted me to tell me that a private school needed Arabic language teachers for the ninth grade. I said yes. I studied English literature in Syria, but the school principal said: “You Syrians are good at Arabic.” Actually, I went there, passed three exams in the Arabic language and started teaching. It was only a few hours a week and the salary were also low (about a hundred dollars). My daughter, who was studying journalism in Syria, worked with me and taught the Arabic language to male and female baccalaureate students and after several months I became the Arabic language coordinator in that school. Four months later, the school principal told me that one of the organisations, World Vision International, was looking for a science teacher, so I agreed immediately and also asked that my daughter, who studied English literature, work with me, and that was also granted.

After a while, I had to deal with an unpleasant situation at the private school, so my daughter and I left it. I remained working only with the international organization. The principal's daughter was a not good in the Arabic language, so she had to attend additional classes. One day, she refused to attend the lesson. She said that she spoke to her mother and the latter gave her and her friends permission not to attend the lesson. When her father, the principal, passed by and saw the students outside the class, he became mad at me. I told him what had happened, but he said: “Will this year ever finish?” Hinting thus at the termination of my contract. I got angry when he said that, and I immediately submitted my resignation and my daughter left with me. The principal asked her

to stay, as what happened with me had nothing to do with her, but she refused, and we both left. He sent me a due sum of seven hundred US dollars, but I refused it because I was the one who resigned and according to the school regulations, I should not be paid. Then, he sent it again and I rejected it once more, but everyone advised me to accept it, as the amount was large. Yet, I felt that by accepting it, I would be making a concession at the cost of my dignity. “The amount was enticing, but my dignity is priceless.” [Laughter]

I received training in psychological support from the international organisation, then I worked with them for eight years; four of which as the principal of a school that had male and female students from six camps of Syrian families. I was the principal, the advisor and the one who solved problems between camps and between the Shawish^{liii} and the displaced people. I had to do this, otherwise the students, both male and female, would be forbidden to come to school. I felt like the chief of the area. Even the mayor could not interfere in my work. I was an important person in those years.

After that, they told me in the organisation that I do not have the right, as a Syrian national, to be on the administrative team and that I can only be a teacher. I was very sad and felt that this decision was both sectarian and racist, but I was satisfied with my job and taught for the next four years. I worked at the same time with Mercy Corps organization in the field of relief and data collection and with a third organisation as director of a centre for psychological support.

All this work exhausted me. I always had two shifts, before and after noon and on holidays. At the same time, I have five girls, two of whom

liii Shawish is a title given to the one who has authority over the camp. He may be the owner of the land or its tenant, who rents tents to male and female refugees, and he is responsible for the camp's affairs. (Author)

are engaged. I was also preparing supplies, of all kinds as we used to do in Syria; I was a copy of my mother in that. Every year I prepared one hundred kilos of makdous, fifty kilos of yoghurt that I made from milk after it had been fermented, seventy kilos of olives, Molokhiya, okra, one hundred kilos of beans to be frozen. One hundred kilograms of peas to be frozen, eight boxes of tomatoes for making tomato paste, and thirty jars of different fruit jams. In addition, I knit woollen clothes for my daughters. I became very tired and developed hepatitis while being under all that strain, but later I recovered from it. Teaching was particularly exhausting I told one of my colleagues that I could not carry on. He nominated me for another organization that wanted to open a kindergarten and was looking for a principal. I was doing all this work even though my husband's financial situation was very good, and all my daughters were working; but I have always wanted to be of some such support for my husband and his unborn son.

The other reason is that the economic situation in Lebanon is very difficult and volatile, especially for Syrian families; so, I did not want to find myself someday knocking on the door of an association to receive aid as long as I and my family have had the ability to work.

I am tired between attempts to settle down and attempts to travel I did not last long as the kindergarten principal because I am Syrian, so I went back to teaching again. I was exhausted but at the same time I was forced to continue working and look for other jobs. Between 2015 and 2016, we saved a good amount of money, and our plan was to travel from Lebanon. Although our financial situation was acceptable, we could not tolerate racism from some people. How much did our travel attempts cost us, and how much we failed! One person promised us, during the first attempt, to get everyone of us a passport and a visa for ten thousand

US dollars, but when we paid him, he disappeared. Then we paid a large sum of thirty thousand dollars for my husband and daughter to travel to Turkey and from there to Germany. I had three girls over the age of eighteen, but we decided that only two would go as the third one was engaged and would soon be married in Lebanon.

At the passports stamping office at the airport, the officer noticed that my husband's passport was issued in the city of Hama in Syria, while the passports of my two daughters were issued in the city of Damascus. He then became suspicious. He checked my husband's passport, but he did not find its number in the Syrian regime's passport system. He took my husband to prison on charges of passport forgery and my two daughters were allowed to board the plane. The two girls were confused. One of them refused to travel without her father, while the second wanted to travel and was confident that I would be able to get her father out of prison. The officer told them that they had to decide quickly, as the plane would fly soon. They decided to stay and returned to me with all the bags and money they had with them.

On their way back, they were subjected to a kidnapping attempt by the taxi driver, but one of them was smart and pretended that she was talking to her father and that she had sent him a picture of the taxi number. The driver stopped his car after taking a different route from the usual one and asked them to get out. They did not tell me what happened to them on the way back until a week later. Having heard that, the idea they could have been raped assaulted my mind. I cried, screamed, and blamed them for not asking me to pick them up at the airport. I started beating myself all over my body in complete astonishment of the two girls. They were aware of my fears, but they were safe and strong, and nothing had happened to them, so why all these emotions? Just thinking

that something could have happened to them made me collapse. I can't help it, this is me.

My eldest daughter volunteered to help get her father out of prison. For a month and a half, she went to Beirut every day. She did not hire a lawyer, she did everything on her own and she was able to bring him back to us despite all the difficulties and disappointments she faced. Now that my husband was with us, I told everyone that the travel plan was done with; we would not try it again as we had lost all our savings from our sweat and hard work. Besides, our travel dossier with the United Nations was stuck at the immigration department, as they said and have always said. The solution, as I saw it, was to settle as much as possible in Lebanon. We were stuck there, we could neither return to Syria nor travel from Lebanon. I will save every penny of our income, then we will buy a piece of land and build a house for ourselves. This is what we will do.^{liv}

A house for preserving dignity

After working so hard, my husband, some of my daughters and myself, managed to save some money. In 2017 We contacted the mayor to give us his approval to buy a piece of land. We and my in-laws partnered to build a house to share the expenses and stay close to each other. I took the ground floor with the front garden, and my in-laws took the second floor with the back garden. It was a small house of the same size as my home in Zabadani, but only similar in size. Even my daughter requested fifty meters of it for her and her husband.

^{liv} Al-Dimashqiya explained the situation of buying and owning property for Syrian men and women in Lebanon: In Lebanon, as Syrian people, we cannot own land or property, but we can issue a general power of attorney for a trusted person and renew it every five years. A Syrian can own land only in one case, when s/he buys 2,400 shares. As for our situation, we were barely able to buy 500 square meters, and in partnership with my sister-in-law, we each had 250 square meters.

After we built this house, most of our relatives did what we did, they bought the plots of land through a public agency and three or four families each participated in building a house for them and almost the entire street became for the extended family and other branches of the family tree. We now have houses to shelter us, but without any utilities: no electricity, no sanitation and no asphalted roads. The municipality did not provide any services to us, despite their promise to do so when we bought the land. My husband asked the owners of each house to provide one thousand USD so that he could connect their houses to the electrical grid and dig sanitary sewers. It took a long time, but the men, my husband and the workers did everything. There remained the issue of paving the road. We were unable to do it, as it cost up to fifty thousand dollars, so each one of us adapted to the dirt road in their own way. I, myself, used to put nylon bags around my shoes in the winter and had two mops in my car; so, I did not enter my classroom with mud on my feet and my clothes. In the summer, I used a cloth to clean the dust.

I do not feel any belonging to this house. It is mine, yes... but everything else is not mine and does not love me or resemble me. I do not feel a sense of belonging to the region or to Lebanon and I do not know if I had travelled to Europe if I would feel any sense of belonging. I built this house to preserve my dignity and the dignity of my family. No one is forcing me to leave, and I do not feel a constant threat of eviction or a rent increase that we cannot pay.

I wanted a house for myself because I was tired and very sick. My salary is now one hundred and fifty dollars due to the successive crises here and the devaluation of the Lebanese currency. I pay about a hundred dollars on the roads and buy my medications with what is left of my salary. I started to suffer hypertension when my husband was arrested

at the airport and my highest blood pressure reading reached 22. Only a French-made and expensive blood pressure medicine worked for me; so, I tried to obtain or order it in various ways. I also suffer from fatigue of the heart and on top of that, I contracted hepatitis C, which was transmitted to me at the dentist's clinic. I was very tired, and my body was about to collapse, yet I had to continue doing everything, including work, home and management. I went to the American University and the doctor told me that the price of European medicine is ninety thousand dollars, the Turkish price is sixty thousand dollars and the cheapest is the Egyptian one, which costs fifteen thousand dollars. I know, shocking numbers. You should have seen my face when the doctor told me these numbers... I told that to my husband and he said that there was no other solution but to sell the house and buy one of these medicines. I would rather die than sell the house. I flatly refused.

One day, I called my sister, who works as a pharmacist in Syria, and she said that the medicine that was previously available in Syria for this disease had been discontinued years ago, but there was a medicine produced by one of the Syrian pharmaceutical companies over the last seven months. It was still in the experimental stage and its price was two hundred dollars. I asked her to order it for me and told her that I would bear the consequences, whatever they were. I received the medicine, and I put on the table in the living room - I do not have a living room, but I consider the sofa and the table as one [laughter] - for three hours while I was crying, praying to God, asking Him for guidance and help. Then, I took the medicine and used it until I was completely cured, thank God.

Houses have souls that go away when their owners go

In 2014, I returned to Zabadani in a truce that lasted six days. I found my house destroyed, everything in it was broken, inhabited by rats and mice, they were everywhere. And each one of them must weigh five or six kilograms, or so I imagined, our homes became their homes.

[Crying] If my soul were enough, I would give it to my house and to Zabadani, to restore everything to how it was before. Many of the homeowners, men, and women, have died or disappeared and if we who are still alive returned, we would return broken and devastated, oppressed and subjugated and with great sorrow in our hearts. Houses have souls that go away when their owners go. The love that existed between the people who once lived in these houses would not return, even if they returned to their homes. Even if I return tomorrow, I will not feel like returning to my home and my country. They and I do not own ourselves in that place.

The property deed alone is not sufficient for me. I may return one day to restore the walls and stay there, but would I feel that I belong to the place? No, I would not, because I belong to the past and I long for it, its people, its smells, its problems, and its happiness, while... This present is nothing like it. I don't know, this feeling bothers me a lot, because I haven't been back there for years. I hear from my women and men relatives about life and its difficulties. The features with which I draw the image of the place in my memory have changed. On top of that, people are afraid of each other, and the security situation is deteriorating, in addition to

the lack of basic services. I think about returning sometimes, and then I think about my daughters. How could I leave them in Lebanon? True, they are married, but we are their family and support.

Then, would that be just? That they tell me one day that I can return, would that mean that I had got my rights? Even if they renovated the house without me paying a penny for it, would I still be entitled to it? Who would bring back my neighbours and friends? Who would restore that reverberation and life to the streets? Who will bring life back to the field of my family's home? I do not see any justice that can right the wrongs of the past. It may be justice for me now to be able to register the property in Syria in the name of my daughters, as they legally only inherit one-eighth. What remains goes to my husband's cousins and his daughters' sisters, and the same applies to my heirs from my family. I want to guarantee the future of my daughters. My husband and I will get older and die and they do not have a brother or uncle to protect them. Yes, they have husbands, every girl has two university degrees, and they work. But I don't trust life and I will be relieved if I register property for them in Syria, that is the justice I am awaiting now, no more.

I wanted a house for myself be-
cause I was tired and very sick...

I do not feel like belonging to this house.
It is mine, yes...
but everything else is not,
it does not love me or resemble me.

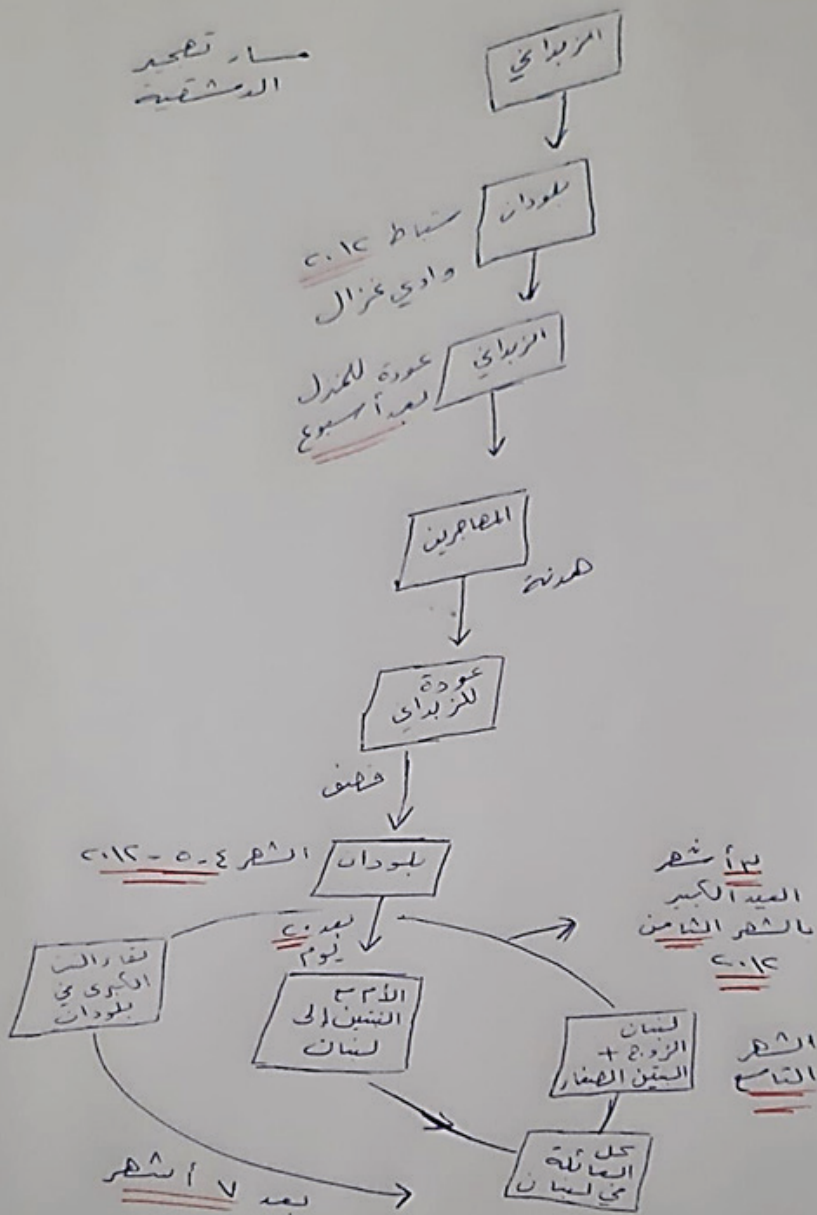
I found my house in Zabadani destroyed, everything
inside it was broken; it inhabited by rats and mice, they were ev-
erywhere

Houses have souls that go away
when their owners go

This present is nothing like me

who will bring life back to
the field of my family's home?

The path of the displacement of Al-Dimashqiya until the date of telling her story



I want my name to be

Shuaa Alamal...

Story telling date: August 2022

The place and I when we were together

Strange feelings and fear of the future in 2011

Lots of bombing and destruction... But I want to go back to my home

Me, my daughter, and the ghost of death

Between the hospital and the many houses we were displaced to

I... Madaya and military checkpoints

The siege of Madaya in 2015...and being away from my husband for two years

My husband's shoes in front of the house... and my eyes peeled open all night long

My husband is now with us...but my responsibilities have increased

The condition of my home and my family's home in Zabadani

What justice will restore me?

The path of Shuaa Alamal's displacement until the date of telling her story

The place and I when we were together

I am from Rif Dimashq, Zabadani area in the Damascus Countryside. My home was in the western neighbourhood. I am fifty-six years old, a mother of five boys and girls, my husband is now with me after a long struggle and the whole family is in Lebanon.

My husband and I lived the first years of our marriage in his parents' house. I dreamed of independence and building a house of my own in which I could be its queen. One day I spoke frankly with my husband and unleashed my imagination. I described my dream house to him in detail. I said to him: "I dream of a medium-sized house with a private entrance for our car, with a large grapevine above its entrance and plaster arches on either side of the entrance. I dream of a small garden with plants and fruit trees, a playground for my children and a small pool with a waterfall." Our financial situation was not good when I expressed my feelings, but my husband did not forget a word of what I said. Given

that he was a construction worker, he built me the house of my dreams five years later from the time I told him about it. I almost went crazy when he took me to that house, I saw my dream before my eyes... my dream came true [sigh]

When you enter, there is the sitting room, then the guest room, followed by a long and wide corridor around it on both sides: My bedroom, the bedroom of my sons and daughters, a large kitchen with a door to a back balcony and a pantry that was like a small shop that contained everything that might or might not occur to anyone: They are all shelves with all kinds of food and materials and each container has the name of the substance inside it written on it.

In each room, my husband built a wood-burning stove and next to it was a statue of a peasant woman baking bread. In the backyard, we built a basketball court for the children. The plan was to build a swimming pool as well, but we were content with what we had. My house had everything we wanted. On the back balcony, there was a swing on which I used to sit and drink coffee when I finished work. I watched my children playing on the slide and the swing, I relaxed to the sound of the waterfall, that was full of lights and made of several layers of different heights through which water flowed. I contemplated the orange, lemon, apricot, acacia, mango and the two olive trees that supplied us with olives all those years... And the greengage tree [laughter] our yard was a piece of heaven on earth.

Every year in Ramadan, I used to make a big, one-time feast to which I invited all the members of both families, from my side and my husband's side. I cooked all kinds of delicious and appetising food. I was preparing that over a period of three days. I did not like anyone to help

me in the preparation, this is my nature [laughter]. It was very tiring, but it was one of the most precious occasions to my heart. We all gathered, and the house swarmed with children, youth, and adults.

literally, I felt like a queen, this house was my kingdom, and my husband was the king and the servant at the same time. He was the one who had the magic wand whose task was to meet my demands with love. We married for love, and he proved to me every day that he was my lover. During his absence later on, I forgot what sleep was like and I contracted all kinds of physical and psychological illnesses... He is with us now, thank God.



Map of the place using Google Earth in 2010

My journey to my family's house, my caring mother's home, the most precious place to my heart, was only about ten minutes away (on foot). I miss my mother's home even more than my mine, but I belong more to my home, where I lived with my children and husband. My mother's house is one of the very old Arab houses. It is very large and has many rooms. In the middle there is what we call "the manzol": A place with balconies, pools, and a high ceiling, which we needed two ladders to reach it when cleaning. It had about 360 plants and trees, both in the summer and the winter and it was surrounded by large arches with a gate grouping three or four doors together. It was a house full of love and warmth, because its inhabitants were men and women with loving hearts: my mother, father, grandmother, brothers and sisters... It was a place where the extended family gathered daily. I lived my childhood there with my five sisters and two brothers. We were more friends than brothers and sisters. We would fight together and laugh together. We would steal my father's car and return it damaged... [laughter] In every corner of that home are rivers of beautiful memories.



A photo of the entrance door to the Shuaa Alamal family home, which she shared with us during the research work.

In that house, I was a troublesome person, moving a lot and helping everyone at the same time. They told me that I did not love myself as much as I loved them. If one of them got sick or tired, I was the one who did all the chores for her, even if it was too much for me. I still have this habit. I constantly feel guilt-ridden if I saw a needy people and I could not help them. I was told that it is a tiring habit. I don't know whether this attribute is good or not, but I love it and it makes me tired, at the same time [laughter].

I felt like a queen, this house was my kingdom and my husband was the king and the servant at the same time

He built me the house of my dreams
...five years later

Our yard was a piece of heaven on earth

My house had everything we wanted

I miss my mother's home
even more than my family's home

It was a place where the
extended family gathered daily

In every corner of
that home
are rivers of
beautiful memories

Strange feelings and fear of the future in 2011

At the beginning of the revolution and the demonstrations, my feelings were mixed... What is happening? Can the people, who used to whisper when they wanted to talk about any political issue related to the country, take to the streets and express their rejection of the regime out loud? Is that which happening the right response to the cruel behaviour of this regime? Should not we be more careful? On the other hand, what is this violence on the part of the regime?

I promised my husband since the beginning of the demonstrations that I would not participate in them. We were afraid for our daughters in particular. My sister was an activist and one of the organisers of the demonstrations. Yet, I agreed with him and decided not to betray his trust in me. Many times, a demonstration would start on a street where I was buying things from stores and I would change my route, even if I saw people I knew. I did not always succeed in avoiding the demonstrations. Sometimes I would run to the parallel street and the demonstrators, men and women, would run to the same street to escape from the security forces.

My fear of what was happening increased when the first shooting occurred in Zabadani at the end of March or the beginning of the April 2011. The revolutionaries had started their demonstration from the Jisr Mosque area, fire opened, and our neighbour's son was martyred. Some said that the one who fired was from the security forces, whereas some others confirmed that they saw masked young men shooting and running away, and some believed that it was an intentional act by certain

party to turn the peaceful demonstrations into armed ones. The martyr is the son of the family that lives behind our house. I did not know him well, but I cried over his death for three consecutive days, crying loudly and loudly. Until now, I do not understand the feelings that came over me. Are they really pure sorrow for him? Or fear for my children, the country, and the future? I don't know... I still don't understand why I collapsed then.

On the thirteenth day of May 2011, a battle took place at al-Jadid street, and it was named al-Jadid Battle, after the street where it was fought. An officer of regime forces was killed, and they went crazy, starting firing heavily at houses and my girls were trapped in their schools. They did not allow my eldest daughter, who was studying at the university, or anyone from Zabadani to return from Damascus. They waited for ten hours, during which I experienced moments of terror that felt like years. To add insult to injury, electricity and communication network were cut off making it difficult to check on my family. Landline phones remained in service, but you had to be careful with every word and question.

The pace of events escalated quickly. One day, my husband and I wanted to buy milk for a kashk recipe. That was on the twenty-second of June 2012. While we were buying milk, we heard the sound of gunfire nearby. We took the milk without even paying and left in our car from another road, thinking that it was safer. The revolutionaries had fled from the demonstration into that street and the regime had fired a shell on them at the moment we entered the street, so we were inside a cloud of black dust, scattered screams, and a suspicious calm at the same moment. We walked quietly trying to find our way through all that dust. We succeeded in getting past the clouds and the vision became clearer. I saw a group of youth carrying the body of a young man covered in blood. I was over-

come with curiosity. I wanted to know who this young man was, so I tried to look at his features and thought he was my nephew, as was the same height and shape of body, so I started screaming. My husband told me that he could not go back to confirm that. So, to calm me down, he swore that it was not my nephew. In fact, it was not him, but rather his cousin, who looked very much like him.

I will never forget the sight of that young man or the blood that covered him. I looked at him in one moment so carefully that I saw freckles on his face, the same freckles on my nephew's face. Since then, my life has become a daily plan to survive the shells and provide for daily needs. Everything has become very difficult: eating, drinking, my daughters, and sons going to school, my husband going to work, everything has become difficult.

In one of the strong campaigns, I think on the twentieth of June 2011, the regime forces arrived at Al-Aja Square and raided all the houses surrounding it, including my family's house. My mother woke up and saw one hundred guns over her head; they were asking her about my brother. My mother stuttered and not a single complete sentence came out of her mouth due to the horror of the scene and her fear for my brother. They searched the house and found my brother, who was newly married at the time. They arrested him in his underwear and took whatever valuables they found on their way out. Since that day, my mother fell ill with a stomach disease from which she never recovered and my brother's wife developed a benign tumour and has had cancer up to this day, but she has a strong personality, and she is able to control the disease; she follows a diet that is beneficial to her and receives treatment.

Conditions worsened rapidly in Zabadani, especially after the Arab League monitoring mission visit to the area.^{lv} There was an expectation among the people of Zabadani that the regime would launch a strong military campaign in the region after the mission left. The mission came and tried to inquire about the situation. I remember the mother of a martyr, who had been killed under a tree on the mountain in a previous campaign, ran barefoot to meet the person in charge of the campaign.

She just wanted to ask him why he killed her son and how she could get justice for him. At that time, the martyr's sister saw that military campaign on its way, so she called her brother and told him to flee to the mountain. He fled with his friend, who was arrested in that campaign and put in jail. Then, when he was released seven months later, he told the mother that her son had been shot dead in front of his eyes, just before him and that he could not tell anyone because he was arrested. The head of the mission met the grieving mother, promised her that justice for her son would be served and sent her in a car to her home. As for me, I was baking bread that day. My husband came and told me that we had to prepare ourselves to leave. I stubbornly refused and cried a lot. But the shells actually started falling on us immediately after the mission left; so, the people of Zabadani began to leave, whereas I insisted not to go out and to continue making bread. But my husband was right. The situation worsened when three shells fell near our house. I feared for my children, so I surrendered, and we left our home.

lv France 24, a report entitled “Tanks withdraw from the city of Zabadani, and the Arab League awaits the observers’ report,” January 2012. ([In Arabic](#)).



Abstract Art of the scene of the martyr's mother asking the mission members why the regime forces killed her

Lots of bombing and destruction...

But I want to go back to my home

I went with my family to a villa located on Sultana Road. It belonged to a friend of my husband from Iraq, but he registered it in my husband's name for reasons related to property law. I stayed there for a week, but my mind and soul were at home. I wanted to go back. I did not want to be in this place ever. I argued with my husband for a long time and our opinions differed many times. I was telling him that I wanted to die at home, in a place I know; I do not want to die like a stranger. He was trying to tell me that there was no one left in Zabadani and that going there now was nothing but suicide. One day, things escalated between us, so I gathered some things and left the villa.

The road was dark, or so I felt, even though it was noon, but the road was completely empty, there were no people, no cars, tanks or shells, as if life had suddenly disappeared from the place. I walked alone for two hours until I reached "Al-Jadid Square" in Zabadani, where I saw the regiments of the regime's army pouring into it. They looked at me with surprised looks without any of them speaking to me, as if they were saying: "What happened to this woman? Has she lost her mind?" I just exchanged harsh looks with them to show that I was strong and not afraid of them. I continued walking, I heard someone asking me from afar about my destination, but I ignored the question. I arrived at a place where there were no regime soldiers, then I saw young men from Zabadani hiding behind the building. When I approached them, they said: "Why are you here?" I replied that I was going home, and no one had the right to prevent me from doing so, so they offered to take me

back because I might die here alone, either from the shells or from the lack of food, drink and electricity, as it was the month of Ramadan in 2012. I refused everything they offered to do and was afraid for them at the same time, as I did not want anyone to be killed or arrested because of me.

I arrived at my house and sat there, not knowing what to do. The Maghrib prayer was called, but I did not break my fast. I had lost my appetite and there was nothing to eat quickly. I began to think about my children and what I had done. So, I decided to walk back. I walked for three hours and arrived at the villa around ten at night. I did not go in directly, but rather I sat on the outside stairs, and I cried. Then, I saw my children out on the balcony crying and wondering where I had been. I had turned off my cell phone. I made a small tap on the door to tell them I was there, then I walked in [deep sigh].

Me, my daughter, and the ghost of death

I have a daughter whom I married off while she was taking the baccalaureate exam, at the age of seventeen. I kept her with me in the villa while her husband was with the Youth in Zabadani. I was afraid that she would die there, far from me and her father and I refused to send her to her husband, who started asking for her. I could see, from the villa, everything that was happening in Zabadani, including the bombing and destruction. How could I send my daughter to her death? But the men from her husband's side mediated and asked to send her, even for a few days, to her husband. We agreed sadly. I did not taste food in her absence and my tears ran down my cheeks, day and night. On the third day of her absence, her husband called me and told me that my daughter had died...

She's now at the medical point...

He had called more than once, and I was refusing to answer. I felt that a news like that would reach me if I answered the call, but he insisted, so my sister-in-law, who was displaced with us along with her children, asked me to answer the call so that I can know what was going on.

I answered...He said what he had to say, screamed and cried...Then he added: "And my mother died too."

I didn't say anything to my family. I lost my mind for a while. They told me later that I started walking strangely between the room I was in and the living room, back and forth, looking for my "Manto."^{lvi} They ask me about what I heard but I couldn't see anything in front of me. They called my daughter's husband again and realised what had happened, so one of them came towards me and slapped me in the face to wake me up... This is what they told me later. My sister-in-law handed me over my manto, and I ran straight away into the street, under the falling shells and bombings. Her husband caught up with me in his car and I rode with him. Shells were raining down from all directions. God protected us until we reached the building where the young men and the bodies of my daughter and her mother-in-law were lying. I saw my daughter's husband carrying a woman with her hair loose and dripping with blood and a large veil over her body and face... I said, "Is this my daughter?" He said: "No, this is my mother." I said: "You are lying." He asked me to lift the cover to make sure and it really was his poor mother. I said: "Where is my daughter?" He said: We sent her to the medical point, so I realised then that she had died before her mother-in-law.

We went to the medical point, and I was in a hysterical state. They told me that my daughter had been sent to Al-Biruni Hospital, a hospital for cancer treatment and x-rays because she might be alive. I couldn't be-

^{lvi} Manto, a word used in colloquial dialect that refers to a long women's coat. (Author)

lieve what I heard. I was surprised that she had been sent to the hospital. What was the reason to take her there if she had died? We headed to the hospital and the shells were everywhere. I saw them falling in front of us and behind us. I arrived and saw them getting my daughter out of the car. I ran to her and held her hand and she opened her eyes... Then I said in my heart: Be that as it may, the important thing is that she still has a pulse and can survive.

My daughter and her mother-in-law were sitting in a room when regime forces struck the anti-aircraft defences atop the building, they were in. A large shrapnel entered my daughter's back and another into her mother-in-law's stomach. The mother fell to the ground and my daughter fell on top of her. Also, my daughter's uncle (her husband's father) was hit by shrapnel and died in his place with them in the same room. When my daughter's husband came in, he thought everyone was dead and called to tell me. The young men entered after him and checked my daughter's pulse and found out that she was still alive, so they called a wonderful doctor who opened the hospital for her and the others.

I saw the hole in my daughter's back. The doctor's hand was entering it comfortably. That hole was very large, and her body was littered with small fragments inside and outside. I saw the doctor taking out my daughter's intestines and putting them on the table. He had a brush and a "Flagyl" intestine steriliser. He told me: I cannot put your daughter's intestines back in this condition. I will clean and stitch up the torn intestines, then place them in your daughter's belly and so he did for hours. My daughter was seven months pregnant, so another doctor came and cut open the uterus. She took out the baby girl with three fragments in her. They put her in the incubator for three days, but she died. We called her Nissan... Nissan died so that her mother could live miraculously.

My daughter is still alive, thank God. She studied and is living her life to the best of her ability, as there are many fragments still inside her. One of them moved and caused an abscess in one of her kidneys. The doctors said that they had to remove the entire kidney, but the doctor who performed the operation was able to extract the splinter and the inflammatory mass without removing the kidney.

Between the hospital and the many houses we were displaced to I stayed with my daughter in the hospital, spending days by her side, while my husband and children moved from one house to another in the Sultana area because of the heavy bombing. They left the villa we were in and got the key to a house far away from the site of the bombing. Then, they started moving from one house to another, until they had to move to an area called Insha'at, which is an area that is not affected by bombing and contains many houses that no one lives in; they were owned by families from Damascus who used to come there in the summer. They contacted the owner of the apartment and he agreed to let them stay there for a short time. Then, we decided together that my family, who was displaced in the same area, join us and live together with us. This move was difficult, as we were about five families together, but we were consoled by staying together in the same place.

As for me, I was between the hospital and the house. My daughter's health condition was not stable, and I had to be by her side, but the clashes and bombing were not far from the hospital, so much so that on a day when the clashes between the Youth and the army intensified and the bullets reached the walls of the hospital. I dragged my daughter's bed with "Serum"^{lvii} dangling down and started running through the corridors looking for a safe place. I was afraid and expected that my daughter might not survive this time. I wanted to protect her, so I reached the

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Serum, a word used in colloquial language that means a solution or blood serum. (Author)

end of a long corridor where was a large window. I deluded myself that we were safe and suddenly an aircraft opened fire and the bullets hit the window right opposite to us... I dragged the bed and my daughter again; I ran and went into a room just so not to see that aircraft anymore...and thus my daughter survived for the second time.

The doctors told me a few days later that I could discharge her from the hospital, but that the doctor would have to visit her every few days to change the wound dressings. I took my daughter home. One of the brave doctors was able to visit her from time to time under the risk of bombing and bullets. It was a risk for any doctor to do so.

I realised after a few days that the house we were in was completely unsuitable for us or my daughter. There were a lot of people there and my daughter's health deteriorated. She was very tired psychologically and this affected her body as well. I went out looking for another house. It was hot, as it was still the summer of 2013. I searched a lot and asked everyone I encountered, until I reached a building whose gate was closed with iron chains, so I asked the Youth to break it and to break the lock of one of the apartments as well. I went inside looking for a phonebook. I contacted its owners and they said that they had to contact the original owners so that they would give me permission to move in. I waited until they contacted me again and agreed to let us live in it, on the condition that we protect it and take care of all the belongings inside. This process was extremely stressful for me; to break into a house that is not yours and communicate with its owners, how horrible this feeling was, but I had no other option.

We moved into that apartment. It was comfortable in the first days, as it was on the ground floor and far from the clash points, but some pro-regime combatants set a checkpoint in front of the building and clashes broke out between the Youth and this checkpoint. We moved to another apartment in the same building on the fourth floor and we stayed in there for three months, until the beginning of 2014. One day, a soldier of the regime's army knocked on our door to tell us that we had to evacuate the building because the pro-regime combatants wanted to settle there, as it was a strategic place from a military perspective, and they would set up an ambush for armed combatants there. They asked us to take only necessary items, because the campaign might end in a few days, and we might be able to return to the apartment. We moved to another building where my brother-in-law's family lived. We stayed with them for a few days, then they decided to go to Lebanon because of the intensification of the bombing, so we remained alone in the apartment, and we were unable to leave for days until the clashes and the bombing subsided.



Abstract Art of the condition of Shuaa Alamal and her daughter when the hospital was bombed

Moving from one apartment to another has become a routine that we repeated every few days, we learned how many clothes we should take with us each time or what items we could leave behind or keep. I do not know how we got through those days, as there was no food, drink or electricity; we were always on the move and under a lot of terror. But I realised that I was strong and would not give up. I started looking for work when I felt that my daughter's health condition began to improve a little. I gathered around me some women from the area, we started a crochet workshop using one or two hooks. I would bring them wool, and we would all work together, then I would dispose of the goods. I do not have an academic degree to look for a job, but I have my personality, my acumen, and my life experience; I had to earn money to provide for my family. I went to Damascus and told the wool seller my story. He sympathised with me, sold me the wool and helped me sell the goods as well. We remained in this situation for about a year. During this period, I managed to secure food and essential expenses for my family, despite the security difficulties we faced—such as the scrutiny at the checkpoints affecting our movement and everything, we carried with us. Despite the psychological challenges, fear, and terror from the bombings and shells, my daughter also helped me. She worked in the field of teaching to support and contribute to our livelihood.

I... Madaya and military checkpoints

Regime forces closed the road to Damascus at the end of 2014. Only the road to Madaya remained open, so I started going there to buy food. But food prices have skyrocketed that we started to eat one loaf of bread every week. Even flour was refused to the people of Zabadani at the checkpoints and their excuse was that we might deliver food to terrorists. So, I had to use the ingredients I had at my disposal to secure food. My only consolation was that my daughter was still alive and that we were all safe and sound and with each other. This is what made me continue to go to Madaya on a daily basis to bring food and buy wool. I found wool there to buy and continue working with the women.

Going to Madaya and dealing daily with checkpoints exhausted me a lot. My husband's mental and physical health deteriorated because he worked as stone mason and plasterer, but now he had no work or workshops left. He is an introvert. Despite his intelligence, craftsmanship and culture, he lacks communication skills even before these events broke out. Before the revolution, I was the one doing everything, and we both agreed that our motto is: "He is the provider, and I am the constructor" He would give me money and I took care of everything.

I used to spend hours at those military checkpoints. Everything depended on the mood of the soldiers and the officer. Sometimes they would let me pass without asking one question, and other times they would start interrogating me about the Youth in my family. I would tell them that I knew nothing about them and that I only work in wool. Sometimes

the officer would ask me to sew clothes for him and his fiancée, then he would ask me to sew them again because he did not like the fine wool thread, and so on...

We had to move into and out of many houses in Dimas and Bludan areas, but we could not bear the situation. People looked at us with hostility - we are the people of Zabadani - so we went back and rented a house in the same area (Insha'at) and stayed there for four months. In 2014, when Hezbollah forces arrived in our areas, my brother-in-law decided to take all the money and gold he had and flee to Lebanon. He asked me to send my eldest daughter with him to help him pass. I did not know that he would give her his money and make her wear all gold on the road; he did not tell me until after the mission was completed successfully.

My daughter decided to stay in Lebanon because she knew that the security forces were looking for her, as she used to give small cash prizes to the outstanding female and male students who she was teaching, as an encouragement factor and nothing more. This raised suspicion among some of the security forces people, on grounds of "where did you get this from?" She said that she would stay in Lebanon, and so she did. She stayed for a while with her uncles, but she could not stand staying with them. So, she moved to a house where only an old woman and her husband were living, in the Gaza area, in Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. People started criticising my husband and me for allowing our single daughter to live alone in Lebanon and it had been about six months since she had left. So, I decided to take her sister to live with her and I stayed with them for four months (approximately between the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015).

The siege of Madaya in 2015...and being away from my husband for two years

I was preparing breakfast at my daughter's house in Lebanon, when I received a call from Syria, and I learned that my husband and one of my daughters had been forcibly deported to Madaya by regime forces (around mid-2015). This daughter had developed a cancerous tumour some time ago and I was able to obtain a pass for her through the checkpoints for chemotherapy at Al-Biruni Hospital. I did not understand how this happened so quickly. My husband said that the regime forces came and asked him and my daughter to collect some clothes within five minutes so that they would be displaced to Madaya. Unfortunately, I had my daughter's medical card with me, so she was unable to convince them that she was sick and that she had to receive treatment. As for the rest of the children, they were at school or at institutes at that moment. We were dispersed and each one of us was in a different place. My greatest misfortune was my husband and my daughter, as Madaya had been surrounded by barbed wire fences and mines and getting out of it would be a miracle. I remembered the medical card and asked many people about the authority that oversaw the siege. They said that I had to go to a specific checkpoint, so I went there and told them about my story. They told me that they would put the names of my daughter and my husband on the checkpoints and that I could come on a specific day to pick them up. I was going to pick them up at a checkpoint about twenty or thirty kilometres away from my area, and it was impossible to go on foot because of mines. So, I asked someone I know to take me there in his car. When I arrived, only my sick daughter was there. The officer

said: “You have a car, and your personality is strong, God willing.”! Take your daughter and provide medical care for her, as for your husband, he is our guest, and we will spoil him a lot.” My daughter and I cried and begged him but to no avail, so we returned without him.

We returned to the house we were staying in at the Insha’at area, it was sealed with red wax. I went to the police station, a soldier came towards me and said that it was a holiday, and he could not help me. After many attempts and paying a lot of money, a soldier accompanied us to the house with a key and we lived there for four months. Regime members were knocking on our door almost on a daily basis, once under the pretext of checking on the apartment’s residents, and another time under the pretext of being concerned about us, our belongings, and our money. They even offered to take the car that belonged to my husband, “to protect it from saboteurs.” I told them that I sold it and had not received the money yet, so they asked me to give them the money when

I would get it, under the pretext of protecting it from theft. I played the fool and told them that I should have actually given them all the money and should have only asked them for my allowance. Then, I pretended that the money would be sent to my husband in Lebanon. They got mad like crazy and continued to harass us every day until I could not stand the situation anymore. I decided to leave my younger daughter with her grandmother and let my eldest daughter finish her university, and we - my other daughter and the boys - went to my daughters in Lebanon. I lost all hope then that the situation might improve or that my husband could get out of the siege or that the regime forces would stop harassing us. I had already lost hope of returning to my home in Zabadani... my destroyed home [sigh].

My husband's shoes are in front of the house... and my eyes peeled open all night long

We arrived in the Lebanese Gaza region in the late summer of 2015. The school year was nearing the end, and I could not enrol my children in school to take any exams. The owner of the house in Gaza refused to let us all rent and stay just in one apartment, so we had to move to an area called Al-Marj. We stayed there for two months and then moved out after suffering a lot from the landlord's behaviour. He was monitoring all our movements, scolded us for using water and then raised the rent. We then rented a house in the Bar Elias area, then a second and then a third. I don't remember if there were more than that... ugh.

I met kind-hearted and generous young men from Syria, who were working with a Syrian relief organisation in the Bekaa region. One of them told me that there was an apartment in the same building where his family lived, an apartment that had no doors or windows, but that I would feel safe being near them. We moved into it, but we stayed only one month because the owner of the apartment decided to renovate it. I moved with my children to an apartment on the ground floor. Its condition was worse as there were no windows or doors, the floor was covered in dirt and mice and cockroaches roamed comfortably there. To my eyes, it was like a pit with a sink and a bathroom. I paid two hundred dollars a month for rent, then the landlord asked to raise it to two hundred and fifty-five dollars; so, we moved from it to an apartment in a neighbourhood on the other side. An apartment that had tiles, at least. We had little to no belongings and moving became a routine: I have

two scarves, some clothes, papers, and blankets. At first, I was happy that we moved into that apartment, but my joy was not complete, as the bathroom was constantly leaking dirty water, so instead of leaving your bathroom clean, you came out with a musty smell and dirty water. After a long discussion with the landlady, she convinced me that she would fix the bathroom after I pay her the next month's rent, and so I did, but she did not fulfil her promise. We then moved to the Al-Nahriyya area. The situation there was difficult for me and my children, as there was a heavy spread of drugs and weapons. We all felt in danger, and we decided to move to the Al-Marj area, where my daughter got a job.

During all of these many moves, which were psychologically and health-stressing for me and the children, the expenses were increasing: Schools, transportation, sending money to my two daughters in Damascus and rent, so looking for a job became a duty. I actually worked on a project for the same organisation that I mentioned previously, a workshop for making accessories from recycled materials and the party funding the project was an accessories and fashion company, so I started working with them and continued for about two years. But the wages became small compared to the rise in prices and the effort I was putting in and half of my daughter's salary was lost every month on transportation, so I decided to look for other jobs to meet our needs.

During that time, we also moved to another house in the Marj area and settled there. I did not tell the landlord the story of my husband, but instead I placed his shoes in front of the outside door. I changed their position every day and replaced them from time to time so that no one would suspect that I did not have a husband. I invented a lot of stories about him and his hard work. This made-up story reduced the harassment and surveillance of people and the landlord that my daughters,

my children and I had been subject to. It provided me a certain security, albeit false, that people would not dare approach us because there was a husband and father with us.

My husband was under siege, getting closer to death every day as the bombing intensified during the last period of the siege. I was staying up all night long, putting a table behind the door to prevent anyone entering. How tired I was in those days, psychologically and physically. My pillows became wet from my silent tears. I used to place the pillow on the balcony or in the washing machine every morning to remove the moisture from my tears and anxiety. My husband's absence has affected all of us. One of my sons had become depressed since his father disappeared and he would dig his head into my waist until it swelled sometimes. As for my second son, he would cry all the time. I had to bear all of that and manage the family's affairs, keeping up appearance in the face of the landowner and the entire neighbourhood.

My husband is now with us, but my responsibilities have increased. The siege and bombing of people in Madaya intensified. Three of my husband's relatives and two of my relatives died of hunger. As for my husband, the houses he moved between were bombed about sixteen times. He was so tired mentally and physically that his sister called me to tell me that, on that day, he lost consciousness on the road and fell because of hunger and that I had to get him out at any cost.

But what could I do? I contacted some people who knew Hezbollah and they said that he could leave for three thousand dollars which I did not have. I asked for money from a young Syrian man who worked in the same organisation, and he gave it to me from his personal money. He warned me against fraud and that they might take the money without me getting any news, as this was what happened with most of the peo-





Abstract Art of the state of mind and feelings of Shuaa Alamal in Lebanon

ple who tried to get their relatives out of the siege. I knew that I might lose money without any result, but I had to satisfy my children who were waiting for their father. I decided to do everything possible for the sake of my besieged husband. The money remained for a month with the person who arranged the mediation, then he returned it and told me that the problem with my husband was his surname, as there were many armed leaders opposed to the Syrian regime who had the same surname. Indeed, what he said was true, as some people came out of the siege with smaller amounts than what I offered, but I kept trying and learned that one of the Hezbollah members could get my husband out for ten thousand dollars, so I decided to sell the Zabadani house or borrow money from anyone [sigh]. Later, someone told me to stop any attempt, as this might fireback on me and my sons and daughters here in Lebanon if I continued trying to get my husband out of the siege. We are in Lebanon and those besieging my husband are in Lebanon as well (Hezbollah).

We heard of the Four Cities Agreement in 2017, the siege on Madaya was ended and people were sent out on buses to be displaced to several areas. I was happy at the prospect of my husband returning to us soon, but at the same time problems were increasing between the landlord of the apartment I was renting and my children. He was disturbed by my son-in-law's visits to us, as we had convened since the beginning that no men, except my husband and male children, could enter the house. But my daughter was engaged, and it was normal for her fiancé to visit us. I then decided to tell the landlord the truth. I told him that my husband was under siege and that he would come to us in the coming days and that people would come to visit us and congratulate us. He became very angry because I had hidden my husband's real situation from him, and he could not tolerate the idea of guests entering the house.

What to do now? One day, a friend of mine saw me getting off the bus with tears running down my cheeks. She asked me about my situations, and I told her everything. She referred me to an apartment that was in the process of being finished and would take a month to finish. I told her that I could negotiate with the landlord to stay for an additional month and then we would move into this apartment. My husband and I moved out at the end of 2017 and as his health improved, he went back to work. He had the task of cladding the building, where our apartment was, with stone instead of paying the rent. In fact, we are in it up to this day and we have a small garden in which we grow some vegetables and plants.

During all these turmoil and difficulties, my health condition deteriorated significantly. I reached a point where I could not stand on my feet due to pain in my knees. I started with physiotherapy, then I took injection that they usually prescribe for people who are seventy years old, but I had to keep on working. So, I took the injections for a while and I had to continue taking them, but they were expensive, as one shot costs \$100 and I had to take it every month, beside many other priorities: A daughter must complete her studies at university, a son must be enrolled at college, another one must pay his school fees, my two daughters were back in Syria and I could not stop sending them money. On top of all that, I had a prolapse in my uterus. The doctors asked me to undergo an urgent operation. I collected some money, but an urgent family matter came up, so I spent the money that was meant for surgery to address that. I assured my family that the money for surgery was safe and that I had an additional amount.

Now, I take a lot of painkillers, two pills in the morning and two pills in the evening and I rely on physiotherapy to deal with the pain. I also

have a disease (rheumatoid arthritis), because of which my joints are attacked several times, and the impact may reach the heart, but it requires inner strength to keep it under control, some nutrients and vitamins for the nerves and this is what I am trying to do. I had to keep going or my whole family would collapse, as everyone needed a lot of money. Besides, the small aid from the United Nations had been stopped for the last four months and prices skyrocketed. So, it has become necessary to work double shifts and constantly search for new opportunities. I tried hard with the employee of the United Nations. I wanted to know at least the reason why food aid had been cut off and why they sent us a letter informing us that we were not entitled to receive any financial aid (four hundred thousand Lebanese pounds at that time); but the employee did not cooperate with me. Instead, she asked me to call and make an appointment. I did and got an appointment in 2025.

An apartment with tiles, at least.

I want to die at home, in a place I know;
I don't want to die like a stranger

To break into a house that is not yours and
call its owners, how horrible this feeling is...

Moving from one apartment to another has become
a routine that we repeated every few days...

I had already lost hope of returning to my home in
Zabadani...
my destroyed home

I had to keep going
or my whole family would collapse

The condition of my home and my family's home in Zabadani

Half of my beautiful house that I described to you previously was destroyed. The entire front facade, all the stone and all the beauty became rubble as a result of the bombing and shells. Only some columns stood still on the second floor. Even the bathroom was completely destroyed. I do not know how a shell or missile reached it. I thought that the bathroom was the safest place in the house. We used to take shelter in it whenever the clashes and bombing intensified... knowing that it had an opening in its roof, a missile could enter from there... I do not know why we used to take shelter in it. ...The myth of the safe bathroom has collapsed [laughter].

I think a mortar shell had fallen on it... I have become an expert in types of weapons. There is the BTR, which is like a canon on a small tank and has a barrel from which the bullets spray out. There are the 21 carried on the shoulder, the mortar and the explosive barrels, but I have a feeling that the major damage to my house was from shells such as the mortar or it could be missiles of another type that I do not know. In any case, my home is currently uninhabitable. We have even tried to sell it, as it is registered with real estate registry,^{lviii} in fact, each floor has a separate property deed. We had thought before everything started out that we might have to sell one of the floors. We contacted the remaining acquaintances that we still had there, and they told us to forget about selling the house, “the house is not for sale.” They could not explain on

^{lviii} The permanent title deed is one of the most common real estate terms. It is customarily called the “Tabo Akhdar.” It is an official document that proves a person’s ownership of a specific property. It is issued with a stamp by the Real Estate Registry Department to which the property belongs in the real estate areas in which the demarcation and editing work took place. ([In Arabic](#)).

the phone for fear of security surveillance, but it seems that there was a ban on selling property in the area or maybe the state had confiscated it, I don't know.

As for my mother's beautiful, warm, affectionate home, it became a hill of rubble. All the roses and plants, the fountain and the large rooms were all destroyed. All that remained was one room in which my mother is living and a Syrian mulberry tree. That tree had died, but my mother managed though to bring it back to life with a lot of effort into it. She had even brought in an agricultural engineer to take care of it. Then the tree started to bear fruit every year and my mother did not only eat from it, but she sent berries to us as well.

I miss my family's home very much [silence], all the beautiful memories that were there, were erased [crying]. There were many of us, many women, in that house, playing, laughing, quarrelling, studying... My study table is still in my mother's room, even though it was broken, but she still has it. That table means a lot to me, as it accompanied me through all the stages of my childhood and adolescence. I loved studying very much and I was diligent, but my father did not allow me to go to university. I brought half the people of the county for mediation, but he held that the road to university and transportation were unsafe and very dangerous for me as a girl. I tried here in Lebanon to complete this dream, but I stopped because of all this pressure and my deteriorating health condition. My daughters and sons are completing their studies, and this is my only consolation. I gave up on many of my dreams, but the fact that my family is alive and well makes up for it...

Do you know? Up to this day, whenever I look at my daughter, who was hit by a shell and see her alive, I can't believe my eyes. She even gave birth to a boy. She was saved by her daughter who died and saved by the wonderful doctor who cut open her womb... Thank God for everything.



A picture of the right facade of Shuaa Alamal's home in 2020, which she shared with us during the research work.

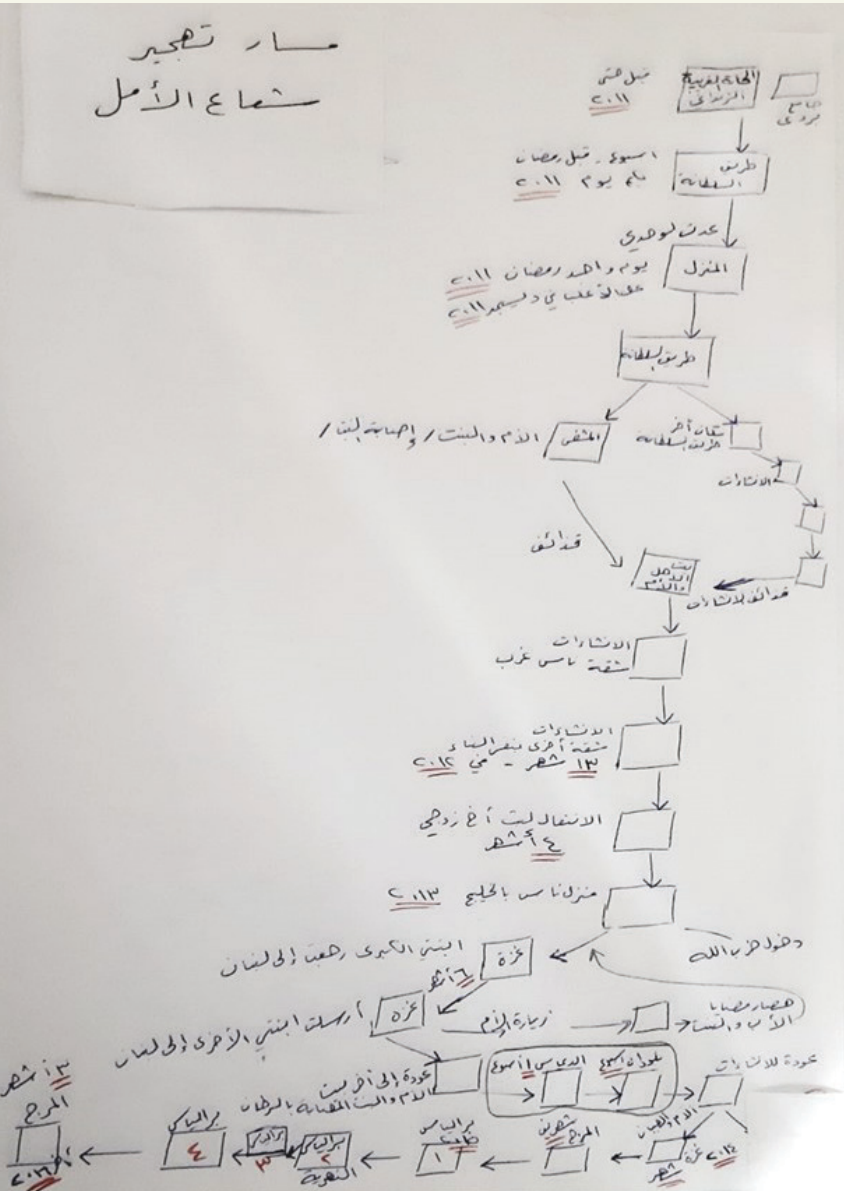
What justice will restore me?

Justice cannot be achieved by the mechanisms we know. What is justice? Even if the head of the regime and everyone with him are held accountable, this does not make up for a single day of torment that we lived through, a loss we endured, a loved one we lost, or a home and a soul extinguished within it. I want accountability, but I do not think or believe that international courts may achieve any kind of justice for us. Heavenly justice may be true justice.

Who will compensate me for the daily anxiety, that resulted in from disappointment, displacement or expulsion? I was constantly terrorized by the idea that one day, the landlord would come and evict me and my family or that we would be deported. I had to face looks of hatred and rejection from some Lebanese men and women every day, from those who thought that we came to occupy their land and share food and water with them.

I am very tired. I am exhausted. I may appear to be a strong woman on the outside, but I have grown weaker on the inside. I am now fragile. I pretend to be psychologically and even physically strong all day, but at night I cannot sleep without taking painkillers and muscle relaxants... What justice will restore me?

The path of Shuaa Alamal's displacement until the date of telling her story





Darayya

Yasmine Sharbaji
Sumaya Khawlani

My name is

Yasmine Sharbaji..._____

Story telling date: October 2022

The place and I when we were together

I have loved the idea of change and liberation since I was a teenager

Finally, the Syrian people revolted

We discussed in the family about the dangers that would face us... But!

My struggle with Haraier Darayya

The disappearance of the angelic aura... the Darayya massacre

It is no longer possible to stay in Darayya

Dear Enas is out of reach

I want a job, my family needs money...

You are banned from traveling

Lebanon... my family, my residence, my work, my studies

2018... Many achievements and shocks

Dad...I graduated

Me and the trial of Anwar Raslan in Koblenz - Germany

Entering a new world... Germany

What happened to my home in Darayya?

A dialogue with my home...and my justice

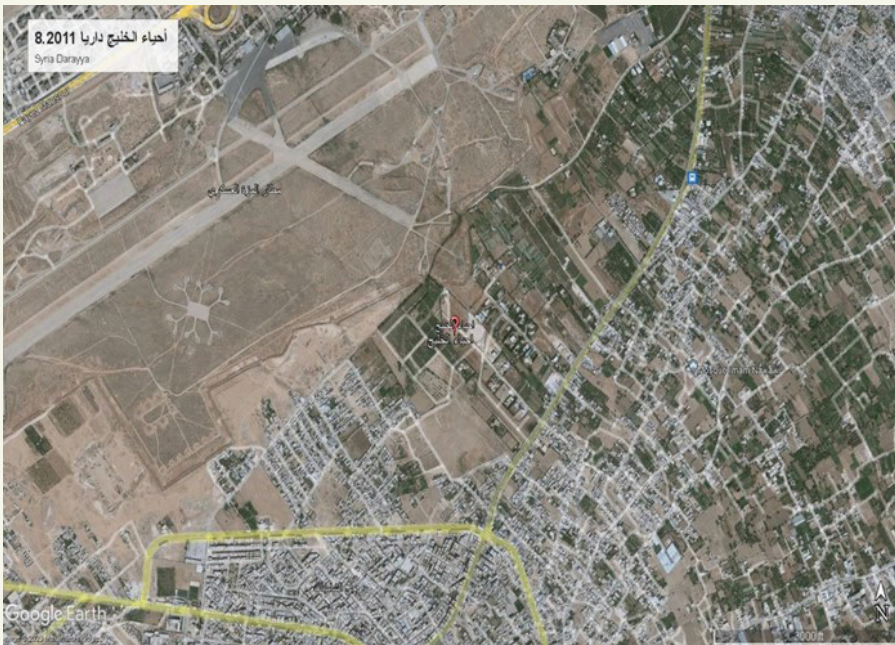
The route of Yasmine Sharbaji's displacement, until the date of telling her story

The place and I when we were together

I am now thirty-four years old. I am from an area in Damascus countryside called Darayya. I was born and lived there for most of my life before I was forced to leave. I studied prosthodontics at the University of Damascus, then psychology at the University of Lebanon and I am now in Germany.

I was born in my grandfather's house located in northern Darayya, in Al-Sharbaji neighbourhood, which was named after the family name, most of whose members live in that neighbourhood. When I was six years old, my family moved to the Gulf area in Darayya, which is about twenty-five-to-thirty-five-minute walk from Al-Sharbaji neighbourhood. My home is next to what is called "Mitor Al-Dala'in", an electricity generator owned by my mother's family. Next to the house are all of Al-Sadiq Al-Amin Mosque, Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein, Khalid bin Al-Walid School and Al-Ish Stadium.

Since we moved into this house, I feel as though an angel has spread its wings over it, protecting it and instilling love and tenderness in it. My house is a one-story house in an extreme agricultural area, close to the Mezzeh Military Airport and surrounded by mountains. The house area and its land are large, about two thousand square meters. My mother filled the house with flowers and my father planted fig, mulberry, olive, orange trees, as well as local and red grapevines. We did not buy fruits from stores as we had everything; rather, we shared what we had with our neighbours. These trees decorated our house, which is considered poor or in an area that was considered poor compared to the rest of the areas in Darayya.



Map of the place using Google Earth in 2011

The exterior house door is orange and beige; it was different from the rest of the doors in the neighbourhood. I think my parents chose to paint it to spread joy in our hearts. When you enter, you see roses everywhere, yellow and red roses, mainly jasmine. Then, there was a long staircase that takes to the roof and underneath it were tiles in blue and white, like the colour of the sky. There were two doors, one of which is brown through which we enter the house, while the second was for a separate guest room. When you enter the house through the brown door, you will find in the living room the “faience” closet, which we were forbidden from touching [laughter]. It belonged to my mother and her mother before her. Then, you will find two doors, a door on the left side, a sliding one, that takes to the kitchen and the bathroom and a door on the right taking the guest room. On the far right is the sitting room and on the left is my mother and father’s bedroom.

All of us children used to sleep in the sitting room, three boys and three girls. But when I reached adulthood and it became necessary for me to have my privacy, I started sleeping with my sister (before the birth of my third sister) in the sitting room, whereas Ammar and Enas moved in (my third brother had not yet been born) to the guest room.



A photo of part of the kitchen in Yasmine's home, which she shared with us during the research work.



A photo of Yasmine's bedroom in her home in Darayya, which she shared with us during the research work.

When the weather was nice and sunny, we studied, stayed up, and ate on “Ard Aldiyar”, we would put mattresses outside, bring nuts, food, fresh fruits, without forgetting particularly a glass of orange juice. We would spend most of the day and night there [laughter]. The fragrance of lemon balm mixed with the that of jasmine, whenever I smell these two scents now, my memory takes me back to that place... Blessed were those days and blessed were the heated debates between us children, my father and my mother, our different viewpoints, our preoccupations with studying and the scattered books, especially when my mother went to college and when she and I graduated together later.

The most beautiful gatherings were when my mother made kashk, that is when she made it and dried it on the roof. My grandmother and aunt

would come to help her, while we children would play around them, put the kashk on our faces and laugh. The best breakfast is kashk with walnuts on top of it, on Friday. I can smell the dish right now as I am talking about it. Also, the smell of the meadow when my father watered it, the smell of the fireplace as it blew out smoke on the harsh winter days, its smell when it was burning while we were all gathered around it talking and discussing.



A photo of Ard Aldiyar land in Yasmine's home in Darayya, which she shared with us during the research work.



A photo of Ard Aldiyar land in Yasmine's house in Darayya, which she shared with us during the research work.

Since we moved into this house,
I feel as though an angel
has spread its wings over it

When you enter, you will see roses everywhere

We studied, stayed up and ate on Ard Aldi-
yar land

The fragrance of lemon balm
mixed with that of jasmine

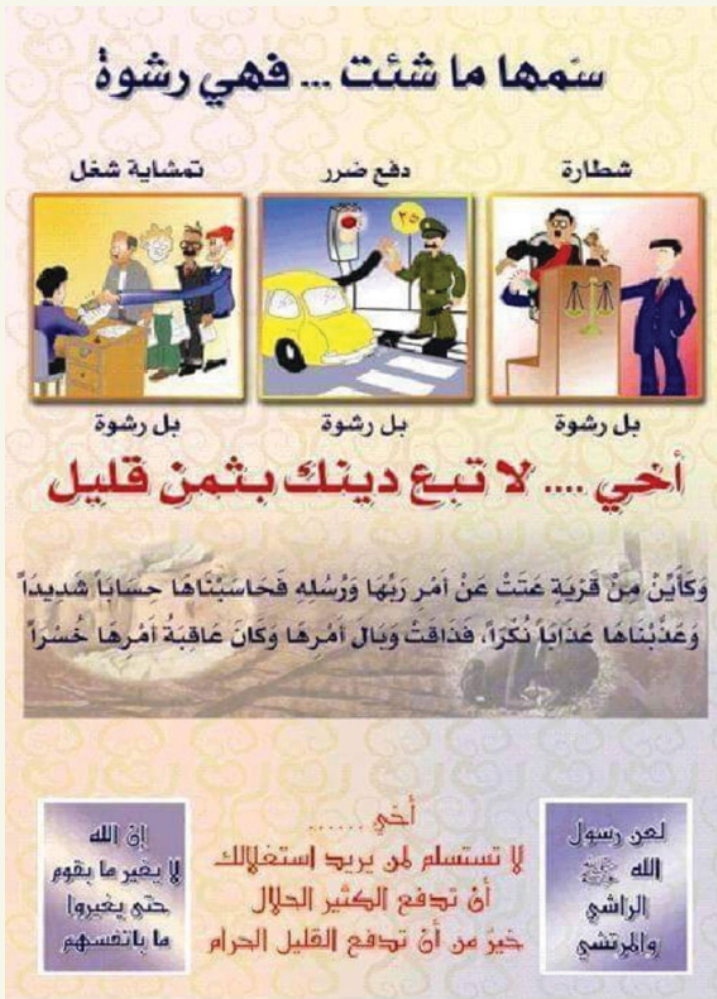
I have loved the idea of change and liberation since I was a teenager

My father's family loves and believes in societal stereotypes. When I was five years old, I had to obey my grandfather and grandmother in everything and to not refuse anything. I cleaned my grandfather's shoes and placed them neatly in front of the door and I helped my grandmother do the chores. My mother did not like all of this style, so she always sought to rid me of this control and to strengthen my personality so that I could decide what I wanted to do. Indeed, as I grew up, I began to think and question many things, and I did not accept things just because people assumed they were the correct habits to follow. My personality began to change at the age of fifteen. In my grandfather's house, I became the rebellious Yasmine, influenced by the opinions of her mother and father, who never accepted the fossilised concepts and relationships within the family or society. My mother used to call for dialogue and not to accept orders or things as they are, and I thought she was right. I no longer tolerated harsh conversations about some of the women in the family and I started defending them. I started asking why? And how? A girl was not supposed to ask such questions, but rather should carry out orders directly. I began to feel the injustice done to women in my family and my mother encouraged me not to accept this injustice, but rather to engage in dialogues and discussions.

My curiosity increased and my desire for societal change increased with Professor Abdul Akram Al-Saqqā, "May God release him from Assad's prisons," who taught us at the Anas bin Malik Mosque. Professor Abdul Akram is a reformer of religious thought. He taught my mother about

openness and debate, and I studied under him at that time. For example, he used to tell us that a woman can read the Qur'an while she is on her menstrual cycle and that what is said about impurity and filth is offensive to her. He was explaining to us how our society was confining women to caring roles. His famous question was: "Did they imprison her out of fear of her or out of fear for her?" He taught us that God is the source of love, so instead of fearing Him, we should love Him and love life. He was an example of peaceful struggle. We, girls and boys, flocked to attend his lessons at the mosque, as his ideas opened new doors for us and raised question marks regarding many religious, societal and political matters.

He was arrested with a group of his male and female students for demanding societal change in 2003. I was in that demonstration that denounced the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. We also published calendars that said: "Call it what you want, but it is bribery." to raise awareness about corruption and bribery in the judicial system and in all state agencies. We also launched a campaign to clean the streets of Darayya, because it was an area marginalised by the state and did not have basic services like those available in the city. Bashar al-Assad's security forces did not like these actions, so they arrested the professor for two months and my mother and some of the women were interrogated, among them were A. K. H. and H. L., and some of his students, including M., were arrested. M, H. Alh, I SH also spent two years in Sednayah prison.



A picture of the calendar that was distributed at the demonstration that Yasmine mentioned, which she shared with us during the research work.

I want to add here that a part of Darayya's community, including my father's and mother's families, did not like Professor Abdul Akram's approach, describing him as rebellious and unconventional and that he corrupts our minds. Sometimes the professor would give lessons to young men and girls together, so that we could discuss and bring our ideas closer to a common ground and to give us the opportunity to get

to know each other with the prospect that we would marry each other and have children who would follow the same intellectual and religious approach. Many of the people of Darayya were opposed to this, describing it as reckless or calling for immorality outside the religion. However, the professor was both a sheikh and an imam, but what he called for was rejected by half of the people of Darayya and approved of by the other half.

I remember that Professor Abdul Akram was banned from giving lessons at the mosque or at his home and during that period, “Al Qubaysiat” became the ones who were in charge of giving religious lessons in 2005. They came to Anas bin Malik Mosque, where I kept going to listen to the Qur’an. I did not approve of what they were doing. We had to kiss the hand of the older teacher, for example, but I refused, and I stopped going there for two months after Al Qubaysiat arrived. I started going to a mosque in the Kafr Sousse area called Abdul Karim Al-Rifai Mosque and my friends at college encouraged me to do so, but I found the same women there. The eldest lady who was a pharmacist, arrived in her car and we all had to stand when she arrived. She used to wear a blue scarf, and she asked us to veil our little daughters, to fear God and never mix with men. For me, Al Qubaysiat’s teachings were consistent with the state’s political agenda. Women should remain in a desolate place, not participate with men or engage in discussions with them and not revolt against outdated societal customs and traditions. I could not stand all of that and I moved between more than one mosque, but I found the same recurrent pattern and the same approach in most of those places. So, I went back to Professor Abdul Akram’s lessons, which were held at his home after the pressure on him eased a little bit and I was very pleased with that.

Finally, the Syrian people revolted

In 2011, when the revolution in Syria started, I was in Mecca city in Saudi Arabia performing Umrah with my grandfather, grandmother and paternal aunt. Everyone tried to prevent me from following the news, to convince me that I should devote to worshipping instead and not be distracted by what was happening in Syria. I was astonished by what was happening and the more I communicated with my mother and father, the more excited and enthused I became.

My family was extremely excited and overjoyed, as the Syrian people had finally revolted against this regime. I returned to Syria on the thirteenth of March 2011 and found that my family had begun coordinating with a group that six months later became called Ahrar Wa Harair Darayya “Darayya free men and women”. Everyone in my house participated in that social movement, even my sisters and brothers in school were participating in student demonstrations. We started out with demonstrations and soon a coordination was formed, because there was already a sort of preparedness for this peaceful movement, which was led by the male and female students of Professor Abdel Akram.

Not all of the people of Darayya agreed with what was happening. I remember that some women threw black garbage bags at us, cursed us and told us: “You are garbage bags,” perhaps because we were masked and wearing black sunglasses and a long black robe, so as not to reveal our identities or because they were against this movement.

The first banner I carried said, “Freedom, Dignity, Civil State.” I then asked about the meaning of a civil state, and they told me that it is a state that accommodates all Syrian women and men of all sects and religions

and is not governed by a specific law or religion. Then I asked about the meaning of a “democratic state.” Some of us thought that we lived in a democratic state [laughter]. Our questions prompted the older generation to start awareness lessons on these concepts: Civil state, democracy and later transitional justice, federalism and so on. All of these lessons were given in complete secrecy and went hand in hand with the peaceful demonstrations in which we participated on almost daily basis.

The peaceful demonstrations continued until security forces raided Darayya, opened fire and arrested Yahya Sharbaji and Ghiath Matar. The tragedy came about when, in September 2011, the security forces sent Ghiath’s dismembered body to his family’s home.^{lix} It was a barbaric and provocative act that put us all in a state of silence, anger and oppression at the same time. Ghiath was from the new peaceful generation, and he was the intellectual son of Yahya Sharbaji. He demanded freedom and peace in the most beautiful ways. Should he be punished, killed, and dismembered for that?^{lx} Yahya’s punishment was arrest and later a death certificate?^{lxi} How on earth could you send Ghiath’s body like that to his family? I had known Ghiath and his family even before those events as well as Yahya and his family. I was so much hurt by their plight, their condition and ours. I was so angry and cried over what happened to him and to us after that shocking incident.

lix One of his last sayings while encouraging the youth of Darayya to persevere and continue was that he and his friends were preparing for an earthquake that would shake the foundations of Darayya. So the news of his martyrdom was that earthquake that struck us and even those in the graves woke up to the horror of what had happened...as the eyelids of Ahrar and Harair of Darayya did not close since the news of Yahya’s arrest reached them. Sharbaji and his friend Ghiath Matar were ambushed by Air Force Intelligence forces on September 6, 2011. Then the family of the martyr Ghiath Matar received his body three days after his arrest, he had been tortured.

This explanation is excerpted from an article published on the Enab Baladi newspaper website entitled “Ghiath Matar, Darayya’s gentle rain... And upcoming freedom rain” March 2012. ([In Arabic](#))

lx Video titled “7 years since his death under torture... Ghiath Matar, ‘Icon of Peaceful Activism,’” produced by Syria TV. (Syrian Archive) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBjWQo0822U>

lxi Video titled “Yahya Sharbaji, the brigade of the revolutionary movement in Darayya, bids farewell to Syria as a martyr,” produced by Step News Agency. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWK2DgUYwO4>
Source: (Syrian Archive)

We discussed within the family the dangers that would face us... But!

I told you what happened to Ghiath Matar, but there were two tragic incidents that took place in my family's home. I should go back to July or August 2011. We used to go out in demonstrations every day, exchanging short messages on our mobile phones stating, for example, that we would gather today to cook or go shopping, at a certain hour. This was the code between us, as everything was censored by state agencies. On the twentieth of August, my mother and I decided not to participate in the demonstration due to health problems. We stayed at home, while my brother Enas used to take part in every demonstration as he tried to film everything that happened and share it with the media. On that day he was arrested. He was nineteen years old, and he was in his first year at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering. My father collapsed when he got the news. He said that he was the one who should be arrested, not his son. We had previously discussed the risks that we could face, the most important of which was arrest, so we talked about the necessity of standing our ground and showing solidarity if this happened to one of us, but reality was different from what we held in theory. My mother and I also felt guilty. If we had gone to the demonstration, Enas would not have been arrested, or so we thought.

Three days after his arrest, my mother, father, and I went to Al-Sadiq Al-Amin Mosque to perform Tarawih prayers together, as it was the month of Ramadan. My father drove us there and told us that he would not come back to collect us as he was going to his family's house. His friend, Abu Haitham al-Hamawi, later told me that my father told him that he

would go to Damascus to attend a demonstration and that he would park his car next to his family's house. We returned home, my father was late, so we called my grandfather's house to ask about him, they said that he had not visited them. My father's cousin called and told us that my father had been arrested. He had been with his friend Tariq on some errand in connection with the revolution. My father did not share with us what he was doing, neither did my mother nor I told him anything about the activities that were organised by the Harair Movement. It was better not to know many details about each other, especially if one of us got arrested. A "makeshift checkpoint" stopped them and called him by name to get out of his car. This meant that someone might have informed the security forces about my father's movements. My father gave the car keys to his friend and asked him to take care of us. Tariq asked the security officer who was from the Republican Guard: "What should I tell his children?" The officer replied: "Raise them and tell them that Bashar (the president) is their Lord." Tariq did not tell us this until 2019. When he wrote an article about the incident "for the Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press," and when I asked him why he did not tell us, he told me that it was difficult to convey such words while we were in the midst of the tragedy.^{lxii}

This was the starting point of our suffering. My brother and father were in detention. I had a brother in Turkey and the remainder of my brothers and sisters were still children, the youngest of whom was only two years old. We were concerned about the location of our home that was near the Mezzeh Military Airport, as the possibility of raids was high, but we were armed with our inner strength and bravery derived from God.

lxii We tried to search for the article, then we asked Yasmine to provide it to us. She asked the author of the article about the link, but he suggested that the link had been deleted by Syria TV. (Author)

My brother Enas was released from detention at the end of 2011, six months after his arrest. My mother was teaching French at a secondary school, I called her to tell her that my brother Enas was at the Darayya police station. The brother of one of our relatives had seen him getting out of the police car at the station. My mother left school running and headed to the police station, but she did not find him there, so she came quickly home after they told her he was on his way back home. As for me, I was waiting for him at home. I cried waiting for him so much that I could hardly see anything. When Enas arrived, I hugged him, smelled him and I collapsed in tears of both helplessness and joy.

We hoped that my father would also be released at the same period, but that did not happen. Financial difficulties began, as my father's income was our source of livelihood. I worked as assistant teacher in a kindergarten, as the dental laboratory in Moadamiya area where I had previously worked, was closed due to the clashes that were taking place there. Prior to that, I had stopped working in my private laboratory seven months after the start of the revolution, due to the bombing of Darayya. I decided at that time to work on four tracks at the same time: To give most of my time to my cause and my revolution, to take the baccalaureate degree again and to stop working in the field of prosthodontics, as I graduated from the University of Damascus in 2008 with a technical diploma in dentistry. Since the beginning, my passion was studying psychology and it increased during the revolution because I realised its importance. So, I decided to start a baccalaureate degree again to study psychology and support my family financially during the difficult situation we were going through.

I registered at Al-Manara Institute to follow the baccalaureate course, but after about four months, the security grip on Darayya got stronger and freedom of movement became even more difficult. Besides, security

officers intervened in the institute because the teacher who taught us (who was also the head of the institute) was an activist in the revolution. I stopped going to the institute and devoted myself almost entirely to revolutionary work.

My struggle with Harair Darayya

I was affiliated with Harair Darayya movement_ and my activity within the group increased during that period.^{lxiii} I learned to administer first aid lessons and took educational courses on civic concepts, in addition to our participation and organisation of demonstrations.^{lxiv} But after a while, I began to feel that I was not in tune with the way some of the young women activists behaved in the gatherings. Some of them were dressing up and adorn themselves during the demonstrations, rushing to be caught on media cameras or thinking superficially. It seems that I was a radical back then and I insisted that all of us should take the matter seriously. In addition, I was exposed to many militant and intellectual values at an early age, so I sometimes felt that we had different backgrounds and knowledge. Yet, that which increased my disapproval was the obsession of some of them to appear in the media so as to depict the reality on the ground, to seek personal fame and to receive funding for themselves. They did not allow the rest of the activists to represent the struggle, convey the facts or to communicate. I felt that the real activists were the ones who were doing all the work behind the scenes, and the fact that only one or two women were exclusively visible was fundamentally against the values of collective work.

lxiii We recommend reading an article written by Razan Zaitounch about the beginnings and goals of the Harair Darayya Association, entitled "The City of Roses and Freedom Launches its New Movement: Harair Darayya Gathering: For these reasons we are here...", January 2012. ([In Arabic](#))

lxiv A video of one of the demonstrations that was organised and led by women from the Harair Darayya gathering, 2011, published on the Sham Network website. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEPFTBYZP_Y

In the beginning of 2012, I decided to form my own group. I got to know a group of young women who had been displaced from Homs province to Darayya. I felt that our style of struggle and our thinking about the revolution and revolutionary activism were similar. We were six women. We went out almost daily at five or six in the morning to distribute or paste leaflets in mosques urging young people to join the revolution and the necessity of speaking the word of truth and not to just content themselves with praying and fasting and living by religious rituals devoid of their deep spiritual content. We also distributed leaflets in schools containing instructions on how to administer first aid as well as the basics of prevention and protection in the event that the regime begins bombing Darayya or uses Sarin gas.^{lxv}

One of the well-known activists in the Harair Darayya movement H.L. found out about our gathering, so she wanted to talk about that and required some explanation as to why I formed my own group. I told her everything and she agreed with me, but she talked a lot about the meaning of collective work and concluded that these divisions affect the greater goal. She asked me and the other colleagues to get back and resume the civic engagement courses, and so we did. I felt that she was right. I may disagree with many others, and I still do, but as long as collective action is in the interest of the revolution, I should stay with the larger group.

After a while, and a few months before the Darayya massacre, an activist who was aware of my passion and interest in psychological support asked me to work with her in a kindergarten for children of the revolution who had lost their fathers, mothers or both. This work was wonder-

lxv Yasmine says that raising awareness about the dangers of sarin or chlorine gas began early in Darayya because of the strange smells emanating from the explosive barrels that Syrian regime forces were throwing from airplanes. Therefore, some activists researched and collected information about what these smells were and concluded that they might be toxic chemicals as deadly as sarin gas.

ful for me. I learned a lot from it about psychological support methods for children who suffer from loss and trauma. It also had a financial reward, which was symbolic, but it was useful to us during that period as none of us at home had any financial income. My experience in this field came from the knowledge I could obtain from accompanying my brother Enas after his release from his first arrest to an institute in the Al-Midan area. There was a psychologist who taught about methods of psychological support and protection for children in situations of war and concepts and methods of nonviolent communication.

The disappearance of the angelic aura... the Darayya massacre

About two months before the Darayya massacre, which occurred in August 2012, the Free Army in Darayya had clashed with regime forces and inflicted losses on them in equipment and lives. The regime forces withdrew completely from Darayya. We had freedom of movement, and we went out in demonstrations day and night. We felt we were free in those days, yet there was a sense of foreboding that the regime was preparing a strong military strike as a retaliation for what happened. Days before the massacre, electricity, the communications network and the Internet began to be cut off in most Darayya areas. This was a clear indication that the regime forces were planning a major military campaign.

In the first two days of the massacre, my brothers, sisters and I were at home and my brother Enas, who was spending most of his time in Darayya was joined by his friends who were media activists. Their mission was to report the events to the media. Al. Ald. and I. Aln. And M. Sh. Ei. Sh. Those who were later martyred came to our home because it was on

the outskirts and the bombing did not reach it because it was close to the Mezzeh military airport, from which missiles were coming out towards Darayya. Another reason is the continued availability of the 3G network that was reaching us from the airport as well as the electricity cable that we shared with them. They could not disconnect it, because that would lead to cutting off electricity from the airport and the prison as well.

Six consecutive days of terrifying missile bombardment on Darayya, as a result of which the walls of our house cracked due to the force of the bombing. The missiles were launched from the mountain and targeted the middle and south of Darayya. In fact, the intensity of the bombing opened some gaps in one of the walls, through which I could see many soldiers marching from Mezzeh Airport to Darayya. Some of them were wearing black bandanas on their heads and wearing green bracelets. Some of them spoke a non-Arabic dialect, from which I could distinguish the Farsi word “Khoda” because I had previously followed an Iranian series.

My brother and his friends stayed with us for the first two days, but they could not stand the lack of news, as they were unable to know what was happening inside Darayya. We begged my brother Enas to stay, but he refused and left with his friends. We were left alone in indescribable loneliness and terror, hearing people screaming and wailing everywhere. Then, we heard someone shouting that the regime forces were at “Mitor Al-Dala'in” and that they were slaughtering everyone in their homes. So, my mother, my younger brothers and I kept waiting for them to knock on our door. My sister R. She went into the bathroom and locked the door, thinking it was the only safe place, then she allowed me and my brother M. to come in. The three of us were in the bathroom. In the beginning, my mother was saying: “Don't be afraid, why are you afraid?”

God willing, they won't come to our house" but then she collapsed. My little sister, who was four years old, was the only one who calmed everyone down and said to us: "Why are you afraid? What could happen?" But when she saw my mother collapsing, she knocked on the bathroom door very hard so that my siblings and I would come out. I came out and found my mother throwing up, her face had turned strangely yellow. I don't remember how I dealt with the situation, but I started waking her up. They did not actually come to our house, but they went to our neighbours' and killed many of them. Then a missile targeted the centre of Mitor Al-Dala'in and killed many people.

We could not leave the house for six complete days, but when the bombing subsided and we went out, it was a shock. They killed an entire family and blood covered the walls of the house. Abu Samra's family was hit by a missile and all of them died. Even our neighbour Abu Akram's nine cows were killed, and he died afterwards. Dead bodies were everywhere, and the smell of blood and death was in the air we breathed.



Abstract Art of Yasmine and her siblings in the bathroom waiting for regime forces to storm the house

The angelic aura

that used to make me feel comfortable has disappeared.

It disappeared after my father's arrest,
but it disappeared completely after the Darayya massacre

[sigh].

Enas returned six days later. We were happy to see him alive and we cried a lot. My brother M beat Enas, crying, and said to him: "Where did you go and leave us alone? Is it not enough that my father is gone." My brother M suffered from involuntary urination and stuttering after those horrible days. As for me, I had not had my period for two years after the massacre and swelling and blood spots appeared on my body. As for my mother, a large part of her hair fell out [crying].

The communications network returned after the regime's army withdrew from Darayya. Fatima, the mother of a daughter who had been displaced from Homs and who was living on an hour's walk from our home, called us. Fatima said that her daughter needed a vaccine. She was suffering from a disease; I can't remember what it was. I had previously got her these vaccine through a doctor from Hama province who used to visit Darayya and teach us the basics of how to administer first aid. I called him and told him about the child's condition. He was able to get the vaccine for her and told me that I could administer them to the child. My mother and I walked for three hours to Fatima's house. It took us a long time to arrive because of the horrific destruction we saw. When we arrived, she told us that her daughter had died, "You arrived now, Yasmine?" [Intense crying] The child's mother was in a state of severe shock and her speech was incoherent. My mother and I were confused, so what should we do? We stayed with her for three hours and cried a lot, then she said that she was tired and wanted to sleep. We left her and went home, and we continued to check on her the following days.

All the way down to Fatima's house, my mother and I saw the most horrific sights one could see: the corpses of cats, blood everywhere and appalling smells. We did not see human corpses as the people of Darayya

had buried them. All the way down there, I was hoping I could make it, administer the vaccine to the little girl and save her. I imagined that if I did that, my father might somehow get out of detention...

But I buried that child with my hands and her mother's hands, and we placed the vaccines next to her...

In 2018, we received my father's death certificate while in detention [severe crying].

[The interview was suspended,
and the second half was postponed to another day]

It is no longer possible to stay in Darayya

Assad's forces stopped launching Scuds and missiles and sending helicopters, after they wreaked havoc in Darayya and killed as many as they could of its people. After the massacre, Darayya was eerily silent, The smell of blood and fear in every corner. People were astonished by what they saw, heard and lived through, especially the massacre that took place in Abu Suleiman Al-Dirani ^{lxvi} mosque. The feeling, sight and situations were as they say, "like the horrors of the Day of Resurrection." My mother, brothers and I decided to leave our home because there was no longer any safety there or anywhere in Darayya. My brother, who lives in Turkey, was able to contact one of his acquaintances in the "Khan al-Shih" area in Damascus countryside. He managed to get us a villa on a farm that its owners had abandoned and only its guard lived there. We took some clothes and some important papers, including ID cards and registration records. However, we forgot many of the papers. Then someone drove us to Khan al-Shih for free.

We did not go there alone, but with the family of my uncle, grandfather and grandmother and we lived together in the new house. We lived together for the most difficult five months of our lives. There were many problems between us and my uncle's family. They did not like our

lxvi Today, the city of Darayya in the Damascus countryside was subjected to one of the most horrific massacres committed by Assad's militias since the beginning of the events more than a year and a half ago. The campaign of raids, storming, sabotage and looting targeted Darayya, part of Kafr Sousse and the Al-Mahaini area adjacent to Darayya Al-Sharqiya. These militias combed the stadium road and burned many farms and houses along it. The Iron Stadium was also bombed, causing serious material damage. The number of martyred victims in Darayya alone reached 208 civilians and more than 150 **bodies were found in the Abu Suleiman al-Dirani Mosque in Darayya**. They had taken refuge in the mosque, but Assad's militias caught up with them and carried out a mass execution in the mosque's precincts, in one of the most heinous crimes of storming and desecrating sacred places of worship.

This explanation is excerpted from a report entitled "A terrible massacre in Darayya and the victims were 208 civilians" on the website of the Syrian Human Rights Committee. ([In Arabic](#))

behaviour and found it strange compared to their lifestyle. For example, we were forbidden to laugh because people died in the massacre, and we had to wear black. We were behaving normally. Sometimes we needed to joke with our cousins, because we wanted solace, and we didn't want to die of grief. We had to carry on. Even if we were survivors of the massacre, we still had to deal with the arrest of our father and our departure from Darayya in a rational way. Moreover, we had to think of our daily life, how to live it and how to keep demanding the release of my father and how to go about our revolutionary activities. Our differences increased when my mother and I volunteered in a school with displaced families from Homs and Aleppo provinces, where I taught, and my mother worked in the administrative department.

My mother has positive energy and the ability to provide psychological support and manage work, even though she was exhausted herself, but she decided to volunteer and not to stay at home. She was in a constant conflict with my uncle's family, defending our movements and freedom and our willingness to go out and help. My grandmother and grandfather tried to resolve our differences, but things got so bad that we left the house with our things. We walked down the street without any plan, so I asked my mother, "Where are we going?" It was a feeling of oppression and helplessness, but our dignity was above all else. We thought of a family close to my father, so we called and went to them. They were also in Khan al-Shih area. They gave us a free room in their house, gave us the most beautiful reception and we ate and drank with each other for three months. We were here at the end of 2012. As for my uncle's family, my grandmother and my grandfather, we later learned that the army forces entered the farm, forced them to leave and burned it under the pretext that there were terrorists or armed men there, so they were forced to look for another place.

I could not stay without volunteering or helping. So, I contacted some of the youth from the Darayya Coordination Committee who survived and were still living there. I tried to ask how I could help them, even with anything. During this period, the members of Harair Darayya parted ways after the massacre, and activities were on hold until the women could settle in safe places outside Darayya. Then, one of the members, M, was the one who was actively involved in raising funds and helping the youth coordination to reestablish field hospitals. I would ask her what I could do, and she would always tell me that I should wait. My mother could not find a place where we would be safe in our movements and activities during that period. Therefore, she contacted her brothers who decided to solve the house problem for us, they rented an apartment for us in the Sahnaya town and paid the rent.

It was many ways beautiful to move in. Finally, we would live together, alone, in a place of our own. We furnished the apartment very modestly, but it was like paradise to us.

My brother Enas and I volunteered with the Children's Rights Association. We started going to Damascus and the Hamzah and Al-Abbas Mosque to provide psychological relief services to the displaced men and women there within the framework of the Children's Rights Association. Our work with this association granted us legal cover that made it somewhat easier for us to move between regions, due to the membership cards they provided us with. We had a distinguished team that believed in the values of the revolution. We tried to establish a volunteer work team to provide this service in an organised way. We did a lot of planning and brainstorming to refine the idea and obtain funding for it, and we called our team "Zidni." Enas played a prominent role in developing media plans, while I was responsible for activities.

Dear Enas is out of reach

Enas and I developed systematic plans for working with children and adolescent girls, as we had previously been trained for this. I worked with displaced teenage girls from all Syrian regions, who were staying with their family members in the mosque within spaces separated by curtains, while Enas worked by drawing on the children's faces and hands and bringing joy to their hearts. On the 30th of May 2013, my brother and I were returning from the Al-Hamza and Al-Abbas Mosque and as usual we separated on the way. Enas, despite having the card with him, preferred to walk along side roads and between orchards because he is a young man from Darayya and a former detainee, while I used to take the micro (minibus) to go home. His friend called him, I do not know what kind of conversation that took place between them. Enas told me that he would meet him and return home and that I should follow the usual path. I arrived home and waited half an hour, but Enas did not come. We called his mobile phone, and he did not answer. After three-quarters of an hour, his mobile phone became out of reach. My mother and I felt that Enas was not alright, as we had previous experiences with arrest. So, she and I got out of the house and started to ask about his whereabouts at the military checkpoints, one by one. We asked soldiers and security personnel if they had come across his name or if he had passed through those checkpoints, but everyone's answer was no, as they had not seen him, and he had not passed through their checkpoints. I collapsed that night. My dear brother's sentence kept echoing in my ears: "If they arrest me again, I won't come out this time." The next day, we went to the Fourth Division checkpoint, which is one of the worst checkpoints. We asked about Enas, and they told us that

he was arrested with his friend at a makeshift checkpoint, that was set between the orchards and that my brother had nothing to do with anything, as their main target was his friend. I contacted his friend's sister, and she told me that her brother had been on a mission to introduce satellite Internet into Darayya and had asked Enas to help him with the logistics. My dear brother, "May God release him, O Lord," was twenty-one years old at the time of his second arrest and he is still detained up to this day. That is, he is now thirty years old, nine years in darkness. When he was still with us, Enas had received many invitations and opportunities to leave Syria, so as to protect him from another arrest, but he rejected them all because he did not want to leave us alone.

I cannot explain to you the feelings of guilt that consumed my body, soul and thoughts for five years after his arrest. How did I let him go alone? Why did not I accompany him? I could have protected him and freed him from the barrier, I was selfish...

Meanwhile, we renewed his registration at the university at Hamak College (Faculty of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering) every year, hoping that he would soon be released from detention and would find his registration valid and could easily enrol again. But, alas, he has not been released yet!

I slowly recovered from those fatal feelings, and I started to accept that what happened was not my fault or of anyone else but the fault of those who arrested him.

I need a job, my family needs money...

In Sahnaya town, I met activists from the Druze community (religious community) through a friend of mine. They were doing wonderful work and they formed what is called the Syrian Democratic Gathering (SDG), a secret group of course, but they were carrying out relief work and awareness-raising activities at the same time. I was very happy to join this group. I first worked on registering the names of families in need of relief on lists and get in touch with them. It was useful that I came from Darayya, and I knew many families there. Then my network extended to more families in other areas, so SDG put me in charge of communication unit because of my social network and enthusiasm. In addition, I joined a training they were organising in Lebanon. I was invited to Beirut to attend a training on transitional justice and three people from the SDG went with me. Unfortunately, the Syrian regime arrested them on their way back. One of them was martyred in detention after two weeks, while my colleague and fellow detainees were released months later. This incident affected the members of the SDG deeply. Most of them became frustrated and many of them left for As-Suwayda province or Jaramana town. But we, who remained in Sahnaya, continued to work more secretly and with less intensity, but we remained with each other.

During that period, I also got to know the Women of the Levant gathering. It was a secret and very active gathering. They wore the niqab,^{lxvii} so I could not see their faces. We would meet in a market to give me money to buy milk for the children and clothes for people on holidays in the Sahnaya area. Later, the group made me top responsible for relief in the Sahnaya area.

lxvii The “niqab” is a type of face veil worn by some Muslim women that covers the face, leaving only the eyes visible. It is a religious and cultural practice associated with modesty and is part of Islamic dress codes. (Author)

All the work I did was voluntary. Of course, I did not want any compensation for revolutionary and relief work, but my family needed money, as none of us was working and had thus no income. Some women who were in the Al-Shawaqa area, which is an area between Sahnaya and Darayya but is administratively part of Darayya, contacted me and offered me to teach science and maths classes to male and female students in the ninth grade and at secondary school in that area in exchange for a fee. I was happy with this work despite its difficulty, as preparing for the lessons took me a long time, especially since I was making illustrative tools and worksheets with my own hands that helped the students understand. I found maths in particular a very dry subject, so I started putting on calm music while the students solved the exercises. I believed that this method worked well. In general, the grades were good. The women managers did not like this approach and considered it “haram,”^{lxviii} so I resisted and tried to explain to them that this method was good and relieved stress and boredom. I told them that I was the one responsible for the students in my class, but the differences worsened, and we could not coexist with each other, so my mother encouraged me to resign despite our financial needs.

My mother told me at the time that we want an environment that embraces us and our ideas, not one that oppresses us and that the most important thing to her is my inner peace. “I will not lose my daughter for a few pounds.” I left work. My uncles continued to support us with expenses during that period and this was difficult for us. The feeling that someone is providing for you is an extremely uncomfortable feeling. I devoted all my time to working with the Women of the Levant group and began working more than ten hours a day. It was normal for me not to request any compensation for what I was doing for the cause, but

lxviii “Haram” is an Arabic term that translates to “forbidden” or “prohibited” in English. In Islamic context, it refers to any action, behaviour, or substance that is considered sinful or impermissible according to Islamic law (Sharia). (Author)

I was very tired. So, one day I dared to ask if they could support me in exchange for what I do. They agreed straight away, and it became clear to me that they had budget to do this. After a while, I asked for a laptop to organise the files and documents I was working on, and they provided it to me as well.

You are banned from traveling

Towards the end of 2013, I was invited by the Italian Kosovo Organisation to a training on civil peace in the Turkish city of Gaziantep for fifteen days. We initiated a training program on the concepts of civil peace, during which I shared my experience with activists in the Democratic Gathering initiative as a ‘train-the-women trainers’ session. A few months later, I also received an invitation from the CCSDS organisation (Centre for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria) in Gaziantep, Turkey. Children were the target group of these training and our goal, in addition to relief, was to teach children the values and principles of civil peace. I went there and received training and came back with an amount of money from them so that we could set up a project in the city of Darayya for four months and then conduct an awareness campaign. I trained some girls from Darayya using the expertise I gained during that workshop, and we launched the project and the campaign.

Then, in 2014, I attended more than one training and workshop in Beirut on the concepts of transitional justice and citizenship. In July the same year, I received another invitation from the CCSDS organisation to attend another workshop in Gaziantep. I arrived at the Syrian border and went in to get my passport stamped. The officer there told me, “You are banned from traveling, so don’t talk too much. Please come with

me.” I almost fell in shock and was certain that this was the day of my arrest. He took me outside the passport stamping centre to a prefabricated room, where I stayed for six hours. Meanwhile, the driver who was waiting for me outside started asking about me. The officer said to him, “The girl is not returning to her family, don’t wait for her.”

During the first two hours of waiting, I began to think of a way to survive and escape. Strange thoughts occurred to me. I thought, for example, that I would hurt myself in some way and then blood would flow, and they would take me to the hospital, so I would escape from there. Or I would ask permission to go to the bathroom, then I would find a window there and escape through it (how naive I was to think that they would even allow me to go to the bathroom in the first place). My main concern was my family. My mother and younger siblings would not cope with my arrest after my father and brother. Two hours later, some officers entered with a man whom they had stripped of all his clothes except his underpants. He was from Raqqa. They started beating him brutally in front of me, accusing him of being with ISIS.

They continued to torture him for an entire hour. I burst into tears and felt helpless. At first, I did not have the courage to ask them to stop beating him and my feelings of guilt for the arrest of my brother Enas returned. After a while, I plucked up courage and told them, “For God’s sake, stop torturing him.” No one paid attention to me, as if I did not exist. I started crying and praying that a miracle would happen to save him from this torment. Indeed, after an hour, one of the officers entered and said: “Leave him, leave him, he is not the one you want.” They stopped beating him and simply left. He was covered in blood, so I approached him and told him not to be sad. Yes, the officers are evil and unjust, but God saved him from their hands. He didn’t say anything to me except,

“Thank God, thank God, I am not the wanted person.”

After a short while, one of the officers came, and I said to him: “Please get me out of here. I want to go back to my family. I haven’t done anything wrong.” He asked me why there was more than one Turkish stamp on my passport. I told him that my brother lives there, and I go to visit him every now and then. He gave me the passport and said to me: You are wanted by Security Division No. 279. Go back to Syria and check with them. I did not even dare to ask him about this Security Division. I left the room around nine-thirty PM, and I was all by myself at the Syrian border area, “Jdeidet Yabous,”; and needless to say, my mobile phone was off all that time. I asked the owner of one of the cars returning to Damascus if he would be willing to take me back with him, and he agreed. I asked him to take me to my aunt’s house in Midan area in Damascus. I arrived there late and did not tell her what had happened. I only asked her to allow me to spend the night with her. I called my mother and told her everything. She advised me never to return home, because the security forces had my address, so I should stay with my aunt while she and my brothers would also leave the house by any means, for fear of any raids or arrest.

I stayed for a month and a few days at my aunt’s house, then I contacted M, one of the members of the Darayya Harair, who was displaced to Lebanon. I told her everything that happened to me. She told me that I should not stay one hour in Damascus and that I should go to Lebanon by being smuggled across the border. I contacted an acquaintance who told me that he would give me the identity card of his sister, who looks like me, with which I could cross the Syrian Lebanese border, in exchange for one thousand six hundred dollars.

On my way to Lebanon, tears were streaming down my cheeks, while asking many questions: To whom am I entrusting my country, my father, Enas, my mother, my siblings, the people and children I worked with and their need for me?

I did not get out of the car at the Syrian border, as the driver got my passport stamped for me. But at the Lebanese border, the driver let me go in alone. The officer was a little suspicious of the photo and started asking me about my eyebrows and why I changed their shape. After a while, he got distracted by something, so I went to another officer, who had more people waiting for their passports to be stamped, so that he would not enough time to go through the questions and indeed he stamped my passport quickly. This was on the first of September 2014.



Abstract Art of the scene of Yasmine's provisional detention at the Syrian border,
with the regime's forces torturing a man in front of her

Lebanon... my family, my residence, my work, my study

I arrived in the Bekaa area and stayed at my other aunt's home for about fifteen days. She hosted me with a lot of love and my time with her was beautiful, but I decided to look for a house to rent on my own to bring in my mother and siblings from Syria. That was the biggest concern on my mind. I found a house to rent for a monthly sum of four hundred dollars. I contacted my mother and told her to leave the house in Syria and to use the money that my uncles were sending us to rent this house in the Bekaa. My mother agreed and came to me with my siblings two weeks later.

I did not have any money, and I needed money to spend on my family and myself, so I started looking for a job. So, I got one with the "Women Now" organisation after my family and I reunited. I initially worked at the Shattaura Centre as a teacher for children. I was not very pleased with that job, as my ambition and experience were closer to civil awareness work, but I kept working. I used to spend a lot of time with children, drawing, singing and colouring with them.

My family and I stayed in that apartment for seven months, then we moved to an apartment in the Taalabaya area, because the monthly rent was significant, and the apartment consisted of three rooms. So, it was better to downsize for a less expensive one. In addition, we were not very comfortable with the landlord, his interference and surveillance. We moved to the Taalabaya area, and my family has ever since been there up to this day. The landlord was not only nice, but he has even

acted as my guarantor to obtain the Lebanese residence permit.

I love that place. It has been somehow a safe abode for me and my family. We established loving and respectful relationships with our neighbours there. This was difficult at first, as our neighbours did not believe that we had a brother and father in detention, that we were alone in Lebanon and that I was the only one working. They thought we were making up these stories, but after they visited us and saw the pictures of my brother and father everywhere, they realised that we were telling the truth and sympathised with us. I believe that we benefit from a special status in our relations with our neighbours, as there has been a lot of negativities on the part of the host community towards the presence of Syrian men and women, especially towards those who were working with organisations and get their monthly salaries in dollars, whereas Lebanese men and women working with the state receive their salaries in Lebanese pounds. But this situation did not apply to us. One of the neighbours was even very happy for me when I bought a car and congratulated me, whereas they became upset, including her, when they see that another Syrian had bought a car. Now most of them send me many greetings through my mother and tell her that they miss me and my presence around the neighbourhood. But on the other hand, some neighbours caused me some harm when I applied for a residence permit. They spread rumours that I worked as a director in a hospital and as a psychiatrist, benefitting from high salaries. These rumours played a major role in slowing down the process of obtaining my Lebanese residence permit, as Lebanese General Security decided to believe them without investigating.

My legal situation in Lebanon was a big problem for me, as I entered the country illegally and, from a legal standpoint, I was still in Syria. I wanted to enrol at university and start fulfilling my dream of studying

psychology, so I had to get my legal status. I went with a Syrian woman, who was previously detained by the Syrian regime and who had the same legal status as me in Lebanon; we went together to Lebanese Security department to settle our situation. I told the officer that I entered Lebanon through the mountains, that is, through the smuggling route. He looked at me and said: “Your name is wanted by Interpol, so it is difficult for me to prepare any papers for you.” I left in shock and began to connect the dots and all my concerns came back to me, as the Security Division No. 279 in Syria is in fact a Security Information Division. So, could it be that he has the power and access to put my name on an international wanted list?

It later became clear that this officer only intended to frighten and terrorise me. Three days later, I received the papers, including a residence permit that I had to renew every six months. However, even that residence permit was not enough to register at the university. I needed a guarantor, and it was very hard to find one. I contacted some, but they disappeared after taking money from me. Then, I could finally find a guarantor for two months; so, in 2015, I enrolled for a psychology course at the Lebanese University in Zahle town. During the rest of the years (until 2018) I was in violation of the law in terms of residency, nevertheless I studied and worked for three years until I finished my studies and graduated with a university degree in the field of psychology, and I achieved my dream.

My job position at the Women Now Organisation changed during those years and I moved to a centre in the Majdal Anjar area and began working with psychological support for mothers. This work was suitable for me from a professional and intellectual standpoint and was similar to what I aspired to in civil work. I was spreading psychological knowledge among women while linking it to the legal rights aspect.

The fact that the organisation had a type of vacation dedicated to employees who are studying, was of great help. I used to take study vacations and study for exams, thus I was able to reconcile work and study to some extent. But the difficulty I had to face at the time was the work atmosphere at the Majdal Anjar Centre. There was a resistance by the centre's women administrators to my method and approach of disseminating values and ideas. They wanted to impose a certain hard approach at work and considered any attempt to change it as a criticism. I was patient for a long time, and it paid off after the general director visited the centre and saw everything, she decided to transfer me to the Shattoura Centre to work there.

2018... Many achievements and shocks

I insisted on obtaining a regular residence permit in Lebanon for many reasons, the most important of which is that I wanted to enrol for a master's degree in psychology after my graduation and for that I needed a new residence permit. I also received many invitations to important workshops and trainings in European countries, which I had to turn down mainly because of my legal status.

The landowner helped me out and became my guarantor, however the process of getting a Lebanese residence permit for a Syrian in 2018 required more than just a guarantor. Public Security summoned me to many interviews and appointments over a period of three months. At the same time, I was studying for my final exams at university and working with the Women Now organisation. There were many days when I took my books and prepared for the exam while waiting in the Lebanese General Security building. Some officers even asked me about the

names of the courses I was taking, and another officer told me during one of the interviews that his fiancée was studying at the same university and had the same major.

I received an invitation to attend a conference or a special event with the Citizenship Association in Paris. I did not know if I could go or not, as everything depended on the residence permit. Fate had that I obtained residency one day before departure, so I travelled with the group to Paris in July 2018. It was a beautiful opportunity; I was happy to travel and meet a distinguished group of people there. It was part of the plan that we would visit the Senate and here was the shock. They did not allow me and two other women to get in unless we removed our hijabs. I refused and considered that an insult to my identity and freedom, so the entire team stood in solidarity with us and refused to go into the Senate. I loved that instance of solidarity very much and I like to mention it whenever I talk about that period, because it meant a lot to me, I felt support and a sense of security.

I returned from France renewed energy. Here I am traveling, I have a residence permit and I will graduate from university. I felt that I had finally started to take some steps on the path towards a kind of stability after a long period of suffering and fatigue. However, on July 23 of the same year, days after my return from France, the regime issued death certificates for some detainees in its prisons, including my father's death certificate (they mentioned in the death certificate that my father had died on 1/15/2013, that is, two years later after his arrest...)

I remember that at that moment I lost my faith in everything... All my hopes had been pinned on the moment my father would leave prison and join us. I had decorated the walls of the house in Lebanon

with large pictures of him and my brother, waiting for this moment. They are on my head all the time. I have been in charge of taking care of the family while waiting for them to be released... So how is it possible that I now received my father's death certificate?

Am I not his eldest daughter who got him acquitted, when I was born years after his marriage, from the accusation that he was unable to have children? He raised me with his hands and whispered in my ear, "You are the girl who got her father acquitted." Am I not the one who was supposed to get her father acquitted again and free him from the darkness of oppression to the light of life?

Did my father really die? And in those cells? No... I did not accept that, and I cried a lot and for a long time that day and I was saddened by this fate. My heart breaks when I imagine that my father was executed and that he endured all that pain without me hearing his groans and moans. My greatest sadness was for my little sister and brother who did not know their father well, especially my brother. He suffered from many psychological disorders, and he hated living with us women and began saying that he needed men to live with, that he wanted a brother and a father, and this was the reason for his social isolation from people. And his constant disputes with me and my mother.

How tired I was during that period. My little sister used to say to me the phrase: "You are not my father, do not play that role." I did not understand the meaning of her words until after a while.

I really tried to fill my father's place. I am the one who works, takes care of the house, makes decisions and solves problems. I am the man in the family, and I am the one who cares about everyone, even my mother,

who lived for years in another world. She was for many years in a state similar to a psychological coma and she did not return to us. Only two years ago, her relationship with us began to improve little by little. But I was exhausted from the inside, and I did not find circles of support around me. Everyone saw me as the strong, capable Yasmine who did not need anyone, while I needed all the support and help there was, I needed a “Warrior’s break.”

I graduated, Dad

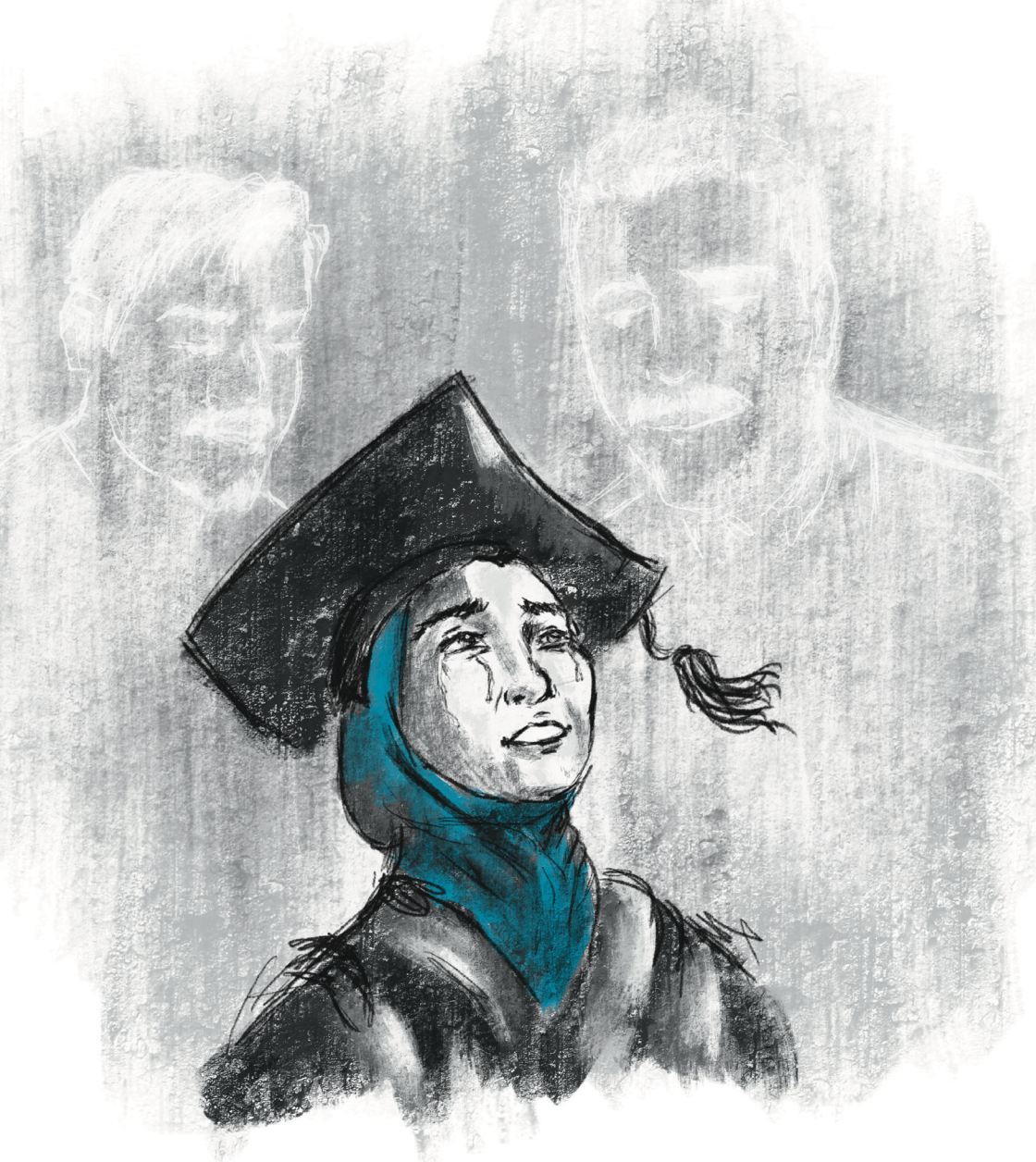
The occasion of my graduation ceremony from the university on October 5, 2019, is one of the most precious occasions in my life. In fact, that day is one of my most beautiful days. They held a big, very organised celebration for us in Beirut. I felt the importance of my achievement and that all the effort, work and study, in addition to my struggle for the cause of my father and brother, had yielded something beautiful. This celebration was a reward for me.

I was hoping that my father would be present and happy for my success, embrace me and be proud of me. While I was at the party, I decided to imagine him with me. He was crying with joy and telling me, “Bravo, you didn’t give up. You majored in a field you loved and made me proud.” My father’s name filled every corner of the hall when they called “Yasmine Abdel Hakim Sharbaji” to receive my graduation certificate in front of all the crowds. I saw my father’s smiling face and I felt that everyone in the hall felt his presence as well when they announced my full name.

As for my heart, it burned for my brother Enas, whose dream was to finish his university studies, graduate and live his life like other young people. I imagined him happy for my success, but sad about his personal future.

You know? Despite this constant sadness, even in moments of joy, the absence of my father and brother is what gives me the strength to continue in this life. I have to fight for them and even for my father, whose death certificate I had received, as I did not believe the news of his death because I do not believe anything that comes from this regime. I cannot give up; I am not allowed to. Everyone must remember my father, and no one should forget him, so I always write about him on Facebook and participate in activities to release detainees from the regime's prisons. Everyone must remember that Abdel Hakim and Enas still exist. "Forgetting is a betrayal of their struggle, and it is a luxury that revolutionary women cannot afford."

For this reason, I decided to enrol in a master's degree, even though my studies at the university and my work had already exhausted me enough. Working in the field of psychological support and dealing with difficult stories and experiences is not easy at all, but as I told you before, I cannot stop. In addition to that, my studies and work are my passion and part of my case.



Abstract Art of Yasmine's graduation scene and her monologue with her father and brother

Me and the trial of Anwar Raslan

in Koblenz - Germany

I was able to enrol in a master's degree and studied the entire two years, until it was time to submit my graduation thesis subject, so I chose it to be about "Ambiguous Loss and its Relationship with Future Anxiety Among Detainees' Wives." This topic was important to me on a personal level, as my mother is the wife of a detainee, in addition to my work with the wives of detainees through Families for Freedom movement group^{lxix} and "Women Now" since 2016. So, I have met many of them, heard their stories and seen the impact of their husbands' absence on them. My supervisor, who directly approved of the topic, told me that this topic was completely new to her and that she was very excited about what I would write. This made me very happy at the time... but this joy was not complete...

I received an invitation to attend a dialogue workshop with ICMP^{lxx} As a representative of "Families for Freedom - Lebanon Team." I applied for the visa and got it quickly. A. Kh alerted me that providing proof of my enrolment in the university would be helpful in obtaining the visa because it is proof of my return, and indeed I got the visa just five days

lxix We are a movement of Syrian families whose loved ones were taken away and thrown in prisons and detention. It is led by Syrian women who are determined to reach their goals. Be with us.

We are Syrian families demanding freedom for all the sons and daughters of Syria. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians are detained or disappeared, most of whom disappeared at the hands of the Syrian regime. They are our sons and daughters, they are the precious things of our lives, wives and husbands, fathers and mothers. They did not take up arms but followed the path of peace. We stand against enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention committed by the regime and a number of parties to the conflict. We want to mobilise popular awareness to pressure all parties to comply with our demands. Our movement will not stop until every Syrian, male and female, is released. We will work to expand our movement to include every family that has a missing or detained person, regardless of race, religion or political belief. They tried to scare and intimidate us. We were told to be silent, but we will not be silenced. We are screaming in the face of this unjust world, demanding the return of our loved ones. From the Families for Freedom website <https://syrianfamilies.org/ar/>

lxx International Commission on Missing Persons <https://www.icmp.int/about-us/>

after the interview. It was a record time to receive the visa and I was happy with that.

I travelled to Germany in January 2022, and while I was there, I heard about the trial of Anwar Raslan, a former Syrian intelligence officer in Koblenz.^{lxxi} I decided to attend as this was an exceptional event and it meant a lot to me. While I was there, I tried not to appear in the media as much as possible for fear that Lebanese General Security would prevent me from returning to Lebanon because of its close connection with the Syrian regime and its security forces. However, there was a moment when I couldn't control myself. Although I was happy with Anwar Raslan's trial, I saw how he stood in his clean clothes in the finest European courtrooms and how he was treated with all humanity.^{lxxii} While my father and brother were in the dark cells, I do not know what their conditions were. I burst into tears, and the media swarmed around me to document that moment. Shortly after, one of my colleagues in the "Women Now" organisation sent me my picture on the Lebanese MTV station. That was in addition to the pictures that were published in international newspapers such as French newspapers *Le Monde*, German newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.^{lxxiii}

I returned to Lebanon with my hand on my heart for fear of being arrested, but nothing happened at the airport. The next day, a friend who was studying with me in my master's degree called me and asked me

lxxi A German court sentenced former Syrian Colonel Anwar Raslan to life imprisonment for committing "crimes against humanity" in a notorious prison in Damascus. Raslan's name was linked to the torture of 4,000 people during the Syrian war. This trial, which took place in the city of Koblenz, is the first criminal case brought to court regarding torture that government officials in Syria are accused of carrying out. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-59957426>

lxxii [A video filmed in front of the court showing Yasmine.](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/13/jailing-former-syrian-secret-police-officer-anwar-raslan-germany-first-step-justice)

lxxiii [https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/13/jailing-former-syrian-secret-police-officer-anwar-raslan-germany-first-step-justice.](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/13/jailing-former-syrian-secret-police-officer-anwar-raslan-germany-first-step-justice)
<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-syria-crime-state-courts-bashar-assad-67b9db9f198e47daaa8b-9b062a064b73>
<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/world/syria-war-crimes-germany-verdict>

three questions: What did you do? What is your activity in Lebanon? Why didn't you tell me that you were going to Germany to attend the trial of a follower of the Syrian regime? These were shocking questions to me. I told her that I had not done anything, that what I was doing in the Bekaa Valley was an activity related to the topic of my graduation thesis and that my going to Germany was for another matter. She asked me about my work with the families of missing persons in Lebanon and I did not deny it. I have a father and a brother who were detained, and it was a natural thing to interact with groups that had the same interest. My friend said all this to protect me, as she had friends in the Lebanese security forces. They told her that my file is now under scrutiny and that they are digging up all the details related to my activities in Lebanon. The consequences of my appearance in the Lebanese media did not stop here. The guarantor told me that he had seen me on television and that this would harm him and his family being my guarantor, because he works in one of the Lebanese state institutions. He wished that my father and brother were released and apologised for not being my guarantor anymore.

I was shocked and confused by all of this. After I almost finished my studies and after my residency was accepted in Lebanon, would all of this happen to me? What to do? My mother and my brothers told me that I had to get out of Lebanon quickly and my friend asked me the same thing. She even raised the idea of the possibility of Lebanese security deporting me to Syria.

For the second time, I was forced to leave my place [crying]. I did not want to drop out of college, abandon my family and give up my job. Who would provide for my mother and siblings? How could I complete my graduation thesis? To whom would I leave the amazing team I built

with Families for Freedom and Women Now and my passionate work with them? But I had no other choice. Rather, I had to make up my mind in a short time, as the visa to Germany expired in twenty days.

Entering a new world... Germany

I decided to apply for asylum at the German airport. I asked the workers there for a quiet place where I could talk about my situation. They told me that I had to convince them why I was applying for asylum, otherwise I would be returned to Beirut. I was extremely afraid, and I had prematurely had my period. I asked them for a hot drink to relieve the pain, so they gave me hot water and brought a translator and began an interrogation with me that lasted for six hours, until their chief came and told them that there was no need for all this investigation. It was enough that she attended the trial that took place in Koblenz and her pictures were spread in the media and that my father and brother were detained in the prisons of the Syrian regime. I was very relieved when I heard those words and I wanted to say to him in Arabic, “May the woman who bore you be blessed” [laughter].

I was transferred to “Camp,” a shelter for women and men asylum seekers, which was in the “Eisen-Hüttenstadt” area. A new era started that of getting to know a new world with people of different nationalities, wonderful nature and extreme serenity to which I was not accustomed before. I am alone, I left Syria for Lebanon alone and now I will start a new adventure alone as well. I often asked myself if I still had the energy and patience for new suffering, especially since everyone I asked said that the first year after applying for asylum was the most difficult. Will I bear all of this?



Abstract Art of the interrogation scene with Yasmine at the airport

Rooms in this centre are shared but have beds. I will now sleep on a bed after sleeping on mattresses for many years. It is a good thing, but the shared room, bed and bathrooms are not clean, and I have to adapt to that. I had to stand in a long line every day to get meals. I was sobbing inside, because this is humiliating for a free person, to wait a full hour for them to serve me a meal. I wasn't used to it, but I decided to be patient and adapt. In the room, I was with a family that was also composed of young men, so I had to wear the hijab 24 hours a day. When I complained about my situation to the supervisor, she told me that it was better to take off the hijab. This response shocked me a lot. Instead of taking me to a room with only women, she just asked me to take off my hijab, I did not discuss it with her and endured the situation.

I met many women and men of different nationalities and cultures and for some reason, I became the person they turned to in order to relieve themselves of their worries. This made me realise that what I experienced and what I had done is my destiny and it is my duty to fulfil it and help people who are in need. Deep inside I was in pieces, but the words of support and gratitude I heard, especially from women, gave me some strength and protected me from imminent collapse. The sentence that I silently repeated was, "I want to get out of every challenge with the least psychological damage possible."

After a month and a half, I moved to another centre in Wenzdorf, which was much better than the previous one in terms of hygiene. There I met new people, especially from Iran and Iraq. I was afraid to speak with Iranian men and women, as their military forces participated in the killing of my people and neighbours in Darayya, but I realised that the people are not like their government. They told me about injustice and oppression in Iran and about the suffering of women and men there. The stereotypical image I had previously drawn of the people of Iran

changed and we developed a friendship with each other. We had in-depth political and legal conversations, and this was a source of pleasure for me. I also became friends with a Yazidi woman from Iraq who had been experienced many traumas. She considered me her guide, listening to her and advising her, and we became friends after that.

I liked this centre very much, knowing that people there compared it to a prison. I used to mock this comparison, especially whenever I remembered Syria's prisons and detention centres. What drew my attention the most there is the possibility of working at the centre based on everyone's experience and receiving a wage according to the number of hours you worked. I had not heard of such activities in other centres, so I considered it a privilege. I worked few hours a day with the children, drawing and colouring with them and my colleague, who was an expert in hair-dressing and styling, also worked. These activities made us feel that we were active and not just numbers there waiting for a decision from the government, eating, sleeping and doing nothing else. There was also an opportunity to learn new hobbies, so I took piano and guitar lessons and started humming guitar tunes in my spare time. I also liked the presence of a prayer hall, where we used to pray in congregation, because we were in the month of Ramadan at that time.

The decision of granting me asylum was issued while I was in this centre. Four months after submitting the application, I obtained political asylum in Germany in a record time compared to other people. So, I had to move to a new place, and I said goodbye to everyone I met and lived with in that centre. We cried a lot bidding farewell and decided to stay in touch to check in on each other.

I was transferred to what is called “Heim” (asylum camp in Germany), and there my life changed: First, there is a small monthly allowance which I used to buy food and other necessities. That meant that I did not have to stand in a long line to get a meal that someone had cooked for me. Most importantly, I had my own room. At first, I hated it, it was dirty and infested with insects and the window had no curtains. I cleaned it well and bought the curtains. I suffered a lot from insects, especially in the summer. I was once taken to the hospital because of the many stings, but I got rid of most of the insects after that and coexisted with some others. I hung a picture of my father and brother on the wall to give me a sense of familiarity in that room. I was moved to another room because of my severe allergy to insects. They gave me a refrigerator and a closet. Of course, the bathroom and kitchen are still shared, but the important thing is that I am now in a room of my own and there were no insects there.



“This is a rose that has great significance for me. I bought it when I first arrived in Germany and called it my family. I have always taken good care of it. It kept me company during my entire refugee journey and remained steadfast and to this day it is still with me. Here I put on the window of my room in the refugee camp.” A photo that Yasmine shared with us during the research work.



“A photo of my activity at the German language school to talk about our country,”

Yasmine shared with us during the research work.

I decorated and arranged the room in a way that looks like me, to reflect my personality and to make me feel at home. I hung up pictures of my father and my brother again, the flag of the revolution, sheets of German vocabulary and sentences that I was learning and gratitude letters on which I write things for which I was grateful every day. I do this to relieve the indignation I feel whenever I think about what happened to me and my family; The arrest of my father and brother, the Darayya massacre, my exit from Syria, the pressure I lived in Lebanon, my family's situation, not completing my studies and being forced to leave Lebanon alone.



“A photo of one of the walls in my first room where I had allergies.”

Yasmine shared it with us during the research work.



“A photo of the window in my room. I placed a painting that I received as a gift from my friends on my birthday.” Yasmine shared it with us during the research work.



“The table in my room” I decorate it, and this is how I used to eat and put the pictures of my family on the table so that I could feel they were with me, and that the revolution, Syria, my Qur’an, and my art are with me as well.” Yasmine shared it with us during the research work.



“Here I invited one of my friends to my second room and prepared dinner, but I had to blurry their pictures.” Yasmine shared it with us during the research work.

I started to feel grateful that I was in a safe place, where I was progressing step by step, studying the language and not having a job that involved psychological pressure. I always remind myself that all the experience and knowledge I have gained must flow back into Syria one day.

I have no homeland except Syria. I am a daughter of Syria. [Crying] I left it wounded, miserable and destroyed. I look at the beauty of nature here in Germany and how the cities are well organised, and I allow myself to enjoy that, provided that I would one day contribute to building a Syria that has the same beauty, calm and organisation. I am grateful to Germany for the humane treatment it gave me compared to the humiliation and oppression I was subjected to in Syria and Lebanon, but all I can think of is that I will return to my country, Syria, where two pieces of my heart are still to be found.

What happened to my home in Darayya?

There is no longer a house, walls, stones or trees. It was completely blown up by the regime forces, along with all the houses in the Gulf area in Darayya, using highly explosive bombs...

As for the land, it is indeed our right, but the laws of the Syrian regime revoked the right of detainees to maintain their properties, and this is what offends me deeply... I would have no home if I returned to Syria. This regime arrested my father, gave me a death certificate and by law we should be able to at least restore ownership of the land, but in the regime's records, my father is still detained, and even if he died and they issued his death certificate, he is still considered their detainee and we are not allowed to claim any property in his name. My uncle has inquired about the ownership of the house and the government employee

told him: “Your brother’s name is registered with us as a detainee. So, if you or any other member of his family claimed his property, you would be all arrested; and the death certificate is just ink on paper.”

I do not believe at all the authenticity of the death certificate they gave me, and I know that they issued more than one death certificate for detainees from Darayya to silence their families and stop demanding their release.



Map of the place using Google Earth in 2022

A dialogue with the house...and my justice

Thank you, my home... You made me, you made Yasmine, a person with a big heart. Thank you for your angelic aura that submerged me in safety and peace for many years. You were poor and humble, and your walls cracked every now and then because your land was agricultural. My mother asked my father to improve your condition and paint you, my father delayed, postponed and then did that. Thank you for all the

conversations and discussions that took place between them about you. Thank you for sheltering this humble, distinguished family with pure hearts [crying] that are hurt by people's pain and always strive to help, hoping that God will compensate them with something better one day... As for justice...look at the ring that I am wearing, it was made of plain material, and I requested that the word "justice" عدالة be engraved on it... Justice has the greatest value in my life. Anyone who knows me closely knows how much justice means to me. I try to apply it in every action I take, but sometimes I fail and sometimes I succeed. Justice is to take our right to freedom and dignity as individuals and communities.

Justice is when a person lives the way they want, not to be stereotyped and contained by society, clerics, and politicians.



A photo of a Yasmine's ring, which she shared with us during the research work.

Justice is for my siblings and I to live with our father and brother, for Enas to come out of detention, study at university, love and get engaged to the woman he wants. For us not to be prone to humiliation and have our home where we lived and were raised. Not to be exposed to horrific situations like those we experienced in Lebanon. [crying]

Justice is for people to hear my suffering, for them not to accuse me of playing and embodying the role of the victim whenever I talk about what happened to me and my family, for me to be appreciated for everything I have done and for everything I have given, for people to understand me and my ambition, instead of questioning my idealism and my expectations.

Justice is to rest after all this fatigue, to find ample time to review everything that happened to me and to be supported to complete my studies. I feel there is some justice here in Germany, because I am in a country that spends money on me to study its language and asks me to work later. Compared to Lebanon, this is justice. I caved the rock back there so that I could be admitted to college, to get a temporary residence permit and my work there was considered a crime. I want to rest a little. Yes, my father once told me: You are one of those triers, so I tell him that I still am, but I am tired, dad.

The path of Yasmine Sharbaji's displacement until the date of telling her story

سار تجبير ياسمين شرابي

عام ٢٠٠٠ كنت أدرس قانوناً في صيدا
تزوجت وانتقلت لبيروت

٢٠١١

الطريق
الطريق

٢٠١١، ٨، ٢٠، اعتقال أمي
٢٠١١، ٨، ٢٤، اعتقال أبي
مجموعة منطلقة في إطار إسرائيلي
٢٠١٢، عودة لبيروت واحدة
بعد العمل بالدم لتفسيق طاق
معه، لتواصل، للدعوى
٢٠١٢، ١٨، مجزرة داريا

داريا
العمل مع حاكم داريا

الطريق
الطريق

مزرعة شلو قبيلة
٢٠١٢، ٨، شهر
٢٠١٢، ٨، شهر

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الطريق

مزرعة عند عائلة
٢٠١٣، شباط
حتى أيلول ٢٠١٤

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الطريق

٢٠١٣، ٥، ٢٠، ٢٠
اعتقال أمي الثاني

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٢٠١٤، ٩، ١، التواجد عند خالتي

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١٥ يوم

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بعد ١٥ يوم خلعت أهلي

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استنجد منزل

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٢٠١٥، شقة جديدة

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٢٠١٨، تدريب مع لواء أمن

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الطريق

٢٠١٨، ٢٠، ٢٠، شهادات وفاة أهلي
داريا من قبل النظام السوري

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معلقة، لبقري

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٢٠١٩، حكمة ماستر

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٢٠٢٠، ٢٠١٩، حرمت من الإقامة اللبنانية

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٢٠٢١، محاكمة أنور رسلان

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الطريق

٢٠٢٢، الشهر الأول

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٢٠٢٢، لجوء في مطار برلين

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٢٠٢٢، هام

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٢٠٢٢، ايزين هون شنات

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٢٠٢٢، فينر دورن

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٢٠٢٢، هام - حتى الآن

My name is

Sumaya Khawlani... _____

Story telling date: July 2022

The place and I when we were together

Me, my neighbourhood and Al-Ibaa School

Me... when the revolution began in Syria

They committed the Darayya massacre...

Parting with my brother (Abu Rashid)

Under siege... Siege of Darayya

A flock of migratory birds arrived

From Idlib to Turkey...a journey of tragedies

There is no comfort or tranquillity except in that
land

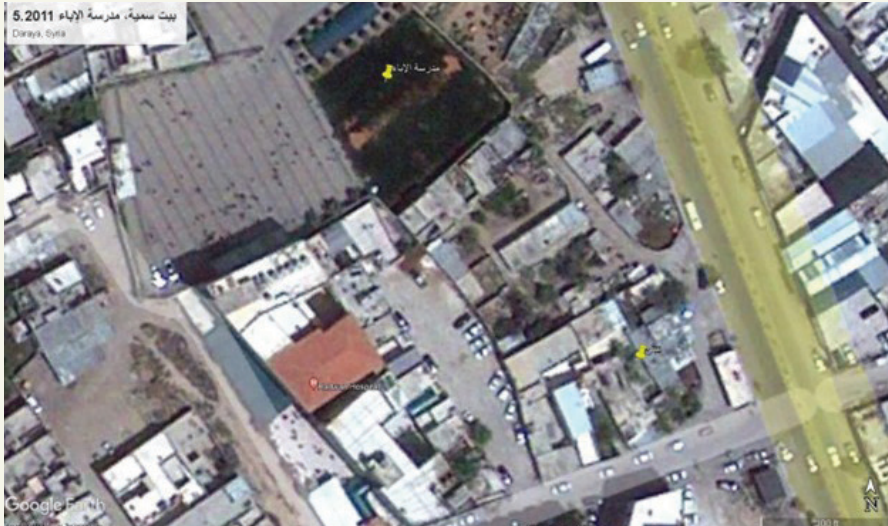
The path of Sumaya Khawlani's displacement
until the date of telling her story

The place and I when we were together

I am from the city of Darayya, and I am now twenty-seven years old. My studies were in the field of biology at the University of Damascus, but I was unable to complete it because of the siege on Darayya and the military checkpoints preventing the people of Darayya from going to Damascus. In Darayya, I was able to follow many courses and training online. I did not earn any certificates, but it increased my experience in several fields, including: training in modification of child psychological behaviour, psychological support for besieged women and the English language.

I am now in Turkey. I worked for a while in the field of women's empowerment and taught English to women. Then I registered at Anadolu University, majoring in theology. I am currently still studying it, in addition to my work as an Arabic language teacher in an international school. I was born and lived in Darayya in the "Al-Khawlani" area, named

after my grandparents, as our lineage goes back to my father Muslim Al-Khawlani, who was buried in Darayya. I lived on a street called Al-Basil Street, next to Al-Ibaa School - which is a joint property of my father and uncle - opposite Al-Radwan Hospital. It is a lively street, with many schools and shops and all my uncles lived there.



Map of the place using Google Earth in 2011

I will describe my family's house before they renovated and restored it. It is a house with three rooms, a kitchen, a bathroom and a large yard, where I played time and again football with my brother who would martyr later. My family used to call me "Hassan Boy" because I loved football and rode a lot on bikes together with my younger brother.^{lxxiv} As for the garden, my brothers and I used to play in it almost every afternoon, digging dirt, looking for earthworms [laughter] and climbing the trees that filled the garden. When my father renovated the house, the garden

^{lxxiv} "Hassan Sabi, or boy" is a term used to describe a girl perceived by society to engage in actions attributed to males or to present herself in a manner closer to that of a boy. Such labels reinforce societal stereotypes about the expected role and attributes of a girl, restricting the freedom of girls to express themselves and pursue their desires in the way they choose. (Author)

was removed, and the house had a second floor.

In that house, I was Sumaya, the girl who had no responsibility other than to study and excel, except helping my mother sometimes with some household chores, such as doing the dishes, for example [laughter]. Most of the time I was studying or playing at home or in the school yard that my family owned, as I mentioned.

My room was on the first floor. It was called “the girls’ room.” It had burgundy carpets, pink sofas and curtains. I used to spend a lot of time in that room, watching movies or studying. At night, I used to go to the kitchen to do my homework so as not to disturb my sleeping sisters. I spent many nights in that kitchen, which I loved very much and drank a lot of coffee in even though I was young.

When leaving my room, I could choose one of three stairs, one of which was internal and connected between my room and the living room, while the other two were external, one overlooking the street and the other overlooking the land and circular in shape. When I was standing at the first step of the circular staircase and looking down, I saw a paradise of green, with grapevines intertwined with jasmine plants. Many times, I was standing at that first step admiring this beauty, looking at the acacia and lemon trees of which we had three. During the lemon blossom season, my mother used to cook “almasiya” for us, where she mixed milk and starch with lemon leaves and flowers...Almasiya had a very distinctive taste and smell.



A photo of the house's courtyard from upstairs in Sumaya's house, which she shared with us during the research work.

The guest room was also one of my favourite places. It has a green colour, like the colour of grass. I do not know exactly what the name of this colour is. It is a colour that brings comfort to the soul. I was waiting for the holidays to help my mother clean that particular room, turn on the vacuum cleaner and devote all my energy to cleaning the sofas. I felt happy when they were clean and completely dust-free...

All of that disappeared, the sofas, the cleaning and the feeling.

The last time the extended family gathered together in my family's house was before the Feast of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha), before the Darayya massacre in 2012. It was the "Makdous" season and most of the women of my mother's family gathered in our house courtyard. We stayed up until two in the morning. The weather was nice and there was a humid breeze. I helped them crack the walnuts and ate a lot of them. My mother told me more than once to stop eating the walnuts so that there would be enough left for the makdous filling, but I continued working and eating [laughter]. My mother prepared a large quantity of makdous, not only for the family, but also for my grandfather and grandmother who intended to travel to Saudi Arabia and for my brother's friends in the Free Army as well... There was a lot of makdous in pickling jars...but the irony is that we did not eat any of it...the Syrian regime's army stormed the house a few days later and we all left.



Another photo of Ard Aldiyar from upstairs in Sumaya's house, which she shared with us during the research work.

Me, my neighbourhood and Al-Ibaa School

The door of our home (the alley door) and the door of my uncle's house overlooked a small alley or entrance, in which my siblings and I played a lot in our childhood. The grapevines in our house were spreading their leaves and beauty over that entrance, and on the other side climbing up the walls to the roof of the house. When I left that entrance, I was directly in front of a flower shop. I bought many flowers from that shop to decorate the entrance one day, to celebrate my father's return from Hajj. I also used the two cypress trees that were on either end, and made an arch of flowers between them. At that time, some snow happened to fall, so the view was wonderful.

Starting from the shop, the main lane begins; on the sidewalk from the right is the house of one of my uncles. This house has an old wooden gate with iron pillars and a "door knocker" shaped like a hand. This gate made me feel like I was in a different historical era whenever I passed by it, as to its left was a place for tethering horses. Opposite that house was Al-Radwan Hospital and a pharmacy. I remember the pharmacy in particular because I would always stand in front of it to watch the toys displayed for the children. I would look at them to decide which toy I wanted to buy for myself or my brothers and then start saving up. I do not see toys in pharmacies here in Turkey, so perhaps this is something specific to Syria. They are toys that look like infants that can be fed and changed or Barbies or piggy banks.

One day, I left the house without my mother's permission. I went to the pharmacy and bought a Barbie. When I returned home and knocked on the door, my mother opened it and was angry that I left without her permission. I took a few steps back and asked her to promise not to punish me. So, she moved aside and allowed me to enter. But I knew that she wanted to scold me, so I quickly ran inside, went into hiding in the bathroom, locked the door and refused to come out until she told me that she would forgive me [laughter].

In our neighbourhood, there was also Al-Ibaa School and many shops next to it, Al-Tayybat Shop, which sells fruit cocktails, juices and sandwiches. After school, I would knock on my uncle's door and ask his daughters, who were my same age, to go with me to that store so that we could buy tasty food and drinks from it. As for the school, it had very large playground that my father, later, would even give me some driving lessons there. In the school's backyard there was a green lawn and water sprinklers. This was my favourite spot. I would lie on the ground and feel the water spray on my face and look up to the sky, letting my imagination run wild. I was in my imagination flying like a free bird. Sometimes, on holidays, my father would take us at night to stay up in that part of the school. How happy I was during those evenings and how much I contemplated the beauty of the sky and its stars. Unfortunately, when I search now on Google Earth/Google Maps for the school, I find that the meadow has disappeared and has become like a desert.

On holidays, I would go with my brother to the schoolyard at sunrise to play football and ride our bikes. A gentle breeze would blow over us after we had sweated from playing [silence], then my brother would go get falafel from the "Abu Ratib" shop and we would eat there. The best thing for us as children was that the hospital was opposite the school. If

we fell or hurt our legs, we would go directly to the hospital, be treated and ask them to issue the bill in my father's name [laughter].

That school has a special place in my heart. I studied there from kindergarten until the ninth grade. Even at a later stage as I completed my studies in another school, I used to go there after school every day to play. I love that school more than my family's home, as I spent the best times of my life there. Even when the Darayya massacre took place, we took refuge in it and hid in its basements.

Life was beautiful, how sad I am that my children will not live like this. They do not have a neighbourhood, nor an uncle's house, nor a grandfather and grandmother's house... Still, God is generous.



Abstract Art of a scene of Sumaya playing with her brother on bikes



A Google Earth image showing the backyards of Al-Ibaa School in 2011.



“Darayya from the roof of Al-Ibaa School,” Sumaya shared with us during the research work.



“Me and my older brother in the backyard of our house” is a photo that Sumaya shared with us during the research work.

In that house,
I was Sumaya,
the girl who had no responsibility other than to
study and excel

I was standing at the first step of the stairs admiring
this beauty, looking at the acacia and lemon trees of which
we had three.

The guest room was also one of my favourite places

I love that school more than
my family's home

Me... when the revolution started in Syria

I was very young when the revolution started, about sixteen years old. I remember that I participated in many women's and student demonstrations and sit-ins. During my baccalaureate class, my father prevented me from studying at Darayya Girls' High School and transferred me to a private institute to restrict my participation in the demonstrations. Since the beginning of the revolution in 2011, I went out with my friends to student demonstrations in the early morning before school started [laughter]. We prepared a lot of leaflets every day. We would distribute them in the neighbourhoods after making sure they were free of security forces. We would scatter the leaflets there and then return to gather with each other. One day, a friend of mine and I surveyed a certain neighbourhood and made sure it was empty of security forces. We threw out the leaflets and said: Allah is the greatest! Suddenly, one of security forces personnel got out of his car and said, "Allah is the greatest, you bloody dog," and started chasing us while shouting the most horrific insults at us. We kept running, then we hid in one of the alleys and escaped arrest.

Another time, I went out with the women in a sit-in for the mothers of detainees. We stood in front of the police station, carrying banners and we were all wearing veils and sunglasses to hide our identities. Because

of our sit-in, the road was block and cars could not get to the street connecting “Shridi Square” and the main highway through the Mezzeh area. Security forces personnel came and stood next to us without doing anything at first, just holding mobile phones to film us. After a while, one of them said: “Come on, stop this sit-in, stop this non-sense.” Some of us said no, we would not return until our sons get released from detention centres. So, he raised his rifle and fired toward the sky. We fled at first and dispersed, then we returned and gathered in the same place. I remember at the time that a young boy who was on his bicycle, he stopped and began filming what was happening with his mobile phone. Then a security officer carrying a rifle ran to him, snatched the mobile phone from the boy’s hand and took him to the security forces car. However, one brave woman among us, K.H. ran to the security officer and forcefully extracted the boy from him and ran away. she actually saved the adolescent boy. The security officer went crazy and started running towards us to arrest us and take us to their cars. The women started running away or hitting the security officers with their bags or banners and we all dispersed and went into different neighbourhoods.

And they committed the Darayya massacre...

I’m trying to remember the events that preceded the massacre... There was a day we called Black Saturday, before which some of Darayya’s young men were martyred, so some of Darayya’s people decided to go out on Saturday to their funeral and members of the Free Army surrounded them to protect them. The demonstration itself was peaceful and the Free Army intervened to protect it from raids by the Syrian army and security forces. They closed most of the neighbourhoods to prevent an attack.

My eldest brother, who was eighteen years old, was with the youth of the Free Army at the time. He was injured having been shot by members of the regime's army who found a way to break into the place. His injury was so serious that his name appeared on some pages calling him a martyr. However, he did not die, thank God, but his name became known and his presence among us became a danger to us. So, he left our home and began moving from one house to another to treat his injury and my mother accompanied him through that. Many of Darayya's youth died during that funeral and for this reason it was called Black Saturday.^{lxxv} Since that time, the actual clashes between the two sides began and the bombing by the regime with all types of weapons increased. After it was limited to shots fired by helicopters, as a result of which many civilians, both women and men, died. One time, a bomb was dropped on a property's courtyard and penetrated one of its walls. It was a long shell, and I don't know what type it was.

On the day of the massacre, I remember that the bombing by the regime forces was very violent. Most of the families went to the basements. My family, my relatives and I hid in the basements of Al-Ibaa School. We were not alone, as many of Darayya's people rushed to the school basements. Our eyes did not close from the intensity of the bombing and the loudness of the voices outside. Some of the Free Army youth were stationed on the roof of the school due to its height and proximity to the hospital, but it seems that the Free Army has begun to withdraw due to

lxxv Throughout its history, Darayya was a peaceful city inhabited by gentleness. From its wonderful nature and fertile soil, it derived the features of a county that loves life. These features had to be the trait of its revolutionary movement and it became a symbol of peaceful movement in Syria. At the beginning of 2012, the city's revolutionaries announced their insistence on continuing on the path to freedom and on the first day of their new year, they raised the flag of independence on a flagpole in the heart of the city in preparation for receiving the Arab Observers Committee, which did not arrive that day, but rather the security forces and the regime's thugs were the unwanted guests, resulting in two martyrs and a number of wounded. The demonstrations continued, taking place almost every day. On Saturday, February 4, 2012, the funeral of some of the city's martyrs turned into a horrific massacre, which was the first massacre in the city, which was called the Black Saturday massacre or Bloody Saturday, in which 17 martyrs from the city's youth were killed.

This explanation is excerpted from an article entitled: "Darayya... the years have passed, and the grapes are still revolting," Enab Baladi newspaper, January 2013. ([In Arabic](#))

its inability to confront the military force that the regime had prepared to storm Darayya. My brother, who was with the Free Army, called to tell us this and to ask us for forgiveness for leaving us alone in that battle. Members of the regime's army entered Darayya from the Mezzeh area, that is, from a place close to us, so the school was one of the first buildings they stormed. Al-Ibaa School consists of several buildings. We were in the basement of the first of them, women and children, but no young men. As for my uncles, aunts and their children, they were in the basement of the second building. There were young civilian men with them who did not carry weapons. The forces first entered the building where my family and I were. We had locked the gate, so they broke into it and came down towards us. They were not just Syrians; I think there were many Iranians with them and there were those who translated for them what we said and what is happening.

They told us directly, "Why didn't you open the gate? Didn't you hear us knocking?" We replied that we thought they were gunmen, as we had to pretend that we were on their side. One of them, who had apparently checked some of the school's classrooms, came down to us and said, "Sir, those people are on our side I checked and saw the pictures and slogans around the school, all of them are ours." ^{lxxvi} That meant, leave them alone. One of our neighbours got up and distributed bottles of cold water on them as a goodwill gesture.

They began to interrogate us. They asked us if we had seen any of the armed men and if we knew about the people hiding in the rest of the school buildings. We answered that we had not seen anyone because we had gone down to the basements and closed the doors since the bomb-

^{lxxvi} The walls of schools in Syria are normally filled with pictures of the president, Syrian flags and slogans of the Al-Baath Party. So, when the soldier went on his tour around the school's classrooms, he saw these pictures and slogans still hanging on the walls. Sumaya says that leaving these pictures was actually a tactical act so that they would not be destroyed by regime forces. (Author)

ing had intensified and had never gone upstairs. My mother told him that only civilians, men and women, were taking shelter in the rest of the basements and there were no armed men at all. The officer pointed to my brother, who was 12 years old and said to my mother: “Send your son with the soldier so he can guide him through the rest of the basements.” My mother said to him: “I will go with you instead.” He refused and ordered her to send her son.

My brother went with the soldier and after a few seconds we heard the sound of a rifle firing. My mother ran, thinking that the soldier was going to kill my brother, but the officer told her that these sounds were coming from outside. My brother told us later that the soldier had actually “loaded” the gun, stuck its nozzle to his head and told him: “You tell me where the gunmen are, or I will kill you with a bullet.” My brother replied, “I don’t know anything about the gunmen, and I don’t know any army except the Syrian army.” My brother was a child, but he had a lot of awareness at the same time.^{lxxvii} He and the soldier arrived at the second cellar. They took out the young men and lined them up facing the wall. The women and my mother ran over and told the soldiers that these young men were with the regime. They took out their deferred enlistment booklets and gave them to the soldier so they could be sure.^{lxxviii} They did not kill them, thank God. But one of the officers asked: “Sir, shall we burn down the school?” He replied: “No, don’t burn it, but see if there is something to take away and bring it.” So, they looted everything and left around ten or eleven in the morning.

We went straight to our homes after we were sure they had left. We entered the house and found all the doors broken, nothing left in its place,

lxxvii Sumaya’s brother pretended to be a proponent of Syrian regime forces so that the soldier would not kill him. (Author)

lxxviii Taking out deferred military service booklets gives an indication to the regime forces that their holders are loyal to the regime forces. It is also one of the ways or attempts to escape certain death.

all the books on the floor, all the drawers had been taken out of their place and valuables had been looted. We entered my parents' bedroom and found on the bed a machete and a glowing lantern, which seemed to be working with solar energy. These two items were not ours and we did not know why they put them on the bed. My little brother became very angry at that scene, so he picked up the machete and the lantern and threw them from one of the windows overlooking a deserted place. My father told him that we could have used the lantern during the power outage, so my brother went down to bring it from the deserted place and found the body of a slaughtered man... We contacted some men in the neighbourhood. They came and photographed the body and published the photo on Internet. It was identified and was then buried in the Darayya Martyrs' Cemetery.

We made many calls with our neighbours and family friends via mobile phones to check on them, as the landline communications network was cut off and they were fine, thank God. Then my aunt called to tell us about the situation. The massacre of the Abu Suleiman Al-Dirani Mosque, after which news of death began to reach us from everywhere.

^{lxxix} The Syrian army had killed everyone in the field hospital. The massacre was still continuing in the rest of Darayya areas, as the Syrian army moved from one place to another, leaving behind it massacres and death. We remained in this situation for a whole week and every day we received news of mass killings, burned corpses on the outskirts of the city of Darayya, basements filled with the bodies of people who had

^{lxxix} Today, the city of Darayya, in Damascus countryside, was prone to one of the most horrific massacres committed by Assad's militias since the beginning of the events, more than a year and a half ago. The campaign of raids, storming, sabotage and looting targeted Darayya, part of Kafr Sousse and the Al-Mahaini area adjacent to Darayya Al-Sharqiya. These militias combed the stadium road and torched many farms and houses on the stadium road. Then, the Iron Stadium was bombed which resulted in severe material damage. The number of martyred victims in Darayya alone reached 208 civilians and more than 150 bodies were found in the Abu Suleiman al-Dirani Mosque in Darayya. They had taken refuge in the mosque, but Assad's militias caught up with them and carried out a mass execution in the mosque's precincts, in one of the most heinous crimes of storming and desecrating sacred places of worship.

This explanation is excerpted from a report entitled "A terrible massacre in Darayya and the victims were 208 civilians" on the website of the Syrian Human Rights Committee, August 2012. ([In Arabic](#))

been killed... Without any exaggeration, the smell of death and corpses remained in the streets of Darayya for a whole week. “There is actually a smell of death... it’s not just a feeling.” ^{lxxx}

As for women, they killed many of them even though Darayya’s society is conservative and many of the massacres or mass rapes that were committed were concealed. One of my aunt’s neighbours in the municipality area, came to her neighbourhood and saw more than fifteen women that were stripped of their clothes. Some of them had been killed and some were still alive. Also, next to the Abu Suleiman Al-Dirani Mosque, some of them found women who had been raped and thrown away after they had put their underwear over their heads. ^{lxxxi}

In my opinion, there was a big mistake on the part of the Free Army. They were not yet ready to confront the regime’s military power and withdrew immediately when the bombing intensified. Also, some members of the Free Army got rid of their weapons in containers near populated areas and when the regime’s army found them, they killed most of the residents in those areas. Of course, I am not saying that the Darayya massacre occurred solely because of the Free Army’s wrong decisions. Nothing justifies the brutality and violence of the regime’s army and its allies and the massacres they committed, but I am telling you what happened and what made the people of Darayya, in my opinion, split into opponents and haters of the Free Army and supporters of it.

lxxx [On massacre Darayya on August2012,Council the local For a city Darayya \(Arabic\).](#)

lxxxi Massacre Darayya the biggest... Testimonies about 7 days of bombing slaughtering and executions public, Syria, August, 2011. [\(In Arabic\)](#)

Parting with my brother (Abu Rashid) ^{lxxxii}

We did not leave our house after the Darayya massacre. We stayed there until 2013. At the beginning of that year, the regime's army stormed Darayya again and everyone feared that a second massacre would occur like the one that occurred in August 2012. I remember at the time that my mother begged my father to hide for fear of being arrested or killed. After several attempts, my father went and hid in Al-Ibaa School. Assad's forces began combing the place. They entered our house and did not find any of the men. They told us: Close the door and do not even stick your heads out of the door or windows. We abided by their warnings at first, but soon we started to look at the school, because my father was hiding there, and the regime's army started searching the school. Smoke columns started to rise from the school, and we began to tremble from fear for my father. My father survived miraculously. He told us that the soldiers approached his hiding place, but the group leader's mobile suddenly rang, and everyone went downstairs and did not discover where he was.

On that day, I was hiding on the roof of the house, watching the street and the neighbourhood; then I saw some soldiers trying to loot our car, so I ran downstairs to tell my mother. So, she went out, with me behind her and shouted at the soldiers: "This is my car, leave it."

They replied, "It is your husband's car, and your husband is not here. He is hiding from us because he is a terrorist. If he is not, he can come to us at the gate of Mezzeh Airport and pick it up."

^{lxxxii} Sumaya wrote this paragraph when I sent her the story to read, bring modifications and answer some questions. While telling her story, Sumaya did not talk about the details of her brother's death. When I sent her the written story, she decided to add a section about her brother. I only modified the wording of some sentences. (Author)

My mother did not give up and kept arguing with him, so he asked her: “From which family is your husband?”

She said to him: “Al-Khawlani’s.”

He said to her, “He is a Khawlani, and you still dare to speak? Go inside with your daughters and hide yourselves, otherwise I would burn the house down with you in it.”

They took the car, then burned the school. After that day, the bitter siege experience of Darayya began.

Several days later, the Free Army once again took control of the area and the regime’s army withdrew. I went with my mother and siblings to the Khan al-Shih area as it was no longer safe to stay in our home. My father and my older brother stayed at home, but my brother was injured in the head, so my mother returned to take care of him. I stayed with my three sisters and my little brother, Abdul Rahman, who was called Abu Rashid since he was young. He was a short boy with a weak physique, but his mind and thoughts were bigger than his age and his small body. Looking after him tired me a lot. I couldn’t control his hyperactivity after my mother left me in charge. He would sneak out and go explore the regime’s checkpoints’ locations and send their coordinates, via a Zello group to the members of the Free Army.^{lxxxiii} I tried repeatedly to stop him out of fear for his safety, but in vain.

Then, my mother decided to bring us back to be by her side and by my injured brother in Darayya. We returned to our fate by ourselves. We moved to the Moadamiya area of Syria and I worked in the field hospital as a nurse at that time.

^{lxxxiii} The messaging app Zello focuses on voice over traditional text messaging. Zello uses a user interface more similar to a walkie-talkie and this type of application is called a walkie talkie. (Author)

On a cold afternoon, but with a bright sun, my little brother, Abu Rashid, came and greeted us warmly. I remember hugging him at that time, I would not miss that for anything at that time. His face was so bright and radiating that our neighbour told him: “You are radiating Abu Rashid... You look like you have caught some Shabiha.”^{lxxxiv} Of course, we are talking here about a child who was barely fifteen years old. He was helping the Free Army behind the enemy’s lines. He would never kill anyone or participate in battles.

After my brother hugged me, he greeted my mother. She started kissing him and he said to her: “You crushed me with your kisses, but no problem this time.”

He went to fix his mobile phone and then we heard the sound of mortar shells falling near us, so my mother went to our neighbour.

A few minutes later, another shell fell...

Our neighbour rushed to us: “Sumaya, go after your mother... she went to the field hospital, your brother was hit.”

I did not get very nervous because I had become accustomed to it. My big brother, Muhammad Mujahid, was injured twice and thank God he did not die. So, I did not expect anything bad to happen to Abdul Rahman (Abu Rashid).

I arrived at the field hospital...

^{lxxxiv} It is known that the term “Shabiha” refers to a specific group in Syria and the name was later used to refer to the proponents of the regime. He is usually a civilian but who engages in aggressive actions in order to please the authorities. In short, they are the shepherds and thugs of the regime! The phrase is used today during the Lebanese revolution in order to refer to every civilian who goes out on the streets to suppress demonstrators acting as “shabiha” for the regime in place. Therefore, we decided, in what follows, to introduce you to the etymology of the term “shabiha” or the meaning of acting as a “shabiha”! Researcher and linguistics professor, Dr. Nader Siraj, confirmed in his interview with “Sayhat” that “Tashbih (acting as a Shabiha), is when the youth perform spectacular manoeuvres with their cars in front of girls’ schools; it also has other names. It is called “tashfit”, “tashbih” or “tafshikh” in Lebanon, “tafhit” in Kuwait and “zant”, “qatta”, “tajghil” and “tadkhin” in Saudi Arabia. In short, it is a form of widespread “tashbih” among young drivers to attract the opposite sex, to exchange glances and smiles, leading to dating.” He added that “Tashbih in the common sense refers to negative behavioural indicators. It is the act of violent and unlawful re-appropriation that also involves flexing one’s muscles at others.” It can be said that this term has no linguistic origins! It cannot be explained by the word “Shabah (= ghost)”, as some attribute it to a Mercedes car model known in some Arab countries by the Ghost, which actually is Mercedes S600. This explanation is excerpted from an article called “What is the origin of the name Shabiha?” by Ghawi Abu Haidar, Al-Nahar newspaper, November, 2019. ([In Arabic](#))

My mother was praying.

My brother was lying on a bed in the corridor due to the large number of injured people at that time...

I stood next to him. The doctors had opened a hole in his chest and put a tube in, allowing air to reach his lungs.

I realised the disaster then, but my tongue and body became paralysed and even my thinking stopped. I didn't realise what was happening until I saw the blood-stained white gloves being removed from the doctors' hands.

And they say: May his soul rest in peace...

I leaned down and touched his feet, "I swear, they were still warm." I know the cold of death due to my work in the field hospital. I started begging the doctor, "Please, his feet are still warm, please try again."

The doctor complied and tried again but to no avail. And here my mother entered. They told her and she embraced the news with Job's patience that God inspired her heart with.

She began to wipe his face from the effects of "povidone" (an antiseptic substance), kissed him and bid him a final farewell. They took him to another room to prepare him for the funeral. Only my mother and I were beside him. My mother and I prayed the funeral prayer over him. His blood dripped from his head, and he smelled like fragrant musk...

I told him: "Get up, let's go back and play football together in the schoolyards. You can buy me falafel and give me your bicycle."

My father arrived with a large group of people to take my brother to his final resting place. My mother and I went with them, she bid him a final farewell, then my eldest brother arrived at the cemetery... I cannot describe my feelings at that moment, nor can I describe the sadness of my mother and that of my brother Mujahid or the sadness of my father

who was bereaved of his special child.

We prayed for him again and the men moved away before putting him in the grave to allow my mother to give him one last hug, hoping it would bring solace to her heart and satisfy her, but in vain... He was buried, and we returned home.

I remember that night we all slept in one room. We pretended to be asleep, but the sounds of our crying betrayed us. None of us blinked an eyelid.

“There is no Abu Rashid anymore, I used to hear a distinct musical rhythm when I called his name.”

Praise be to God... We belong to God and to Him we shall return... And there is no one to console us except that God has promised us a paradise that will unite us with, after which there will be no separation, God willing.



“A picture of my mother bidding my brother a final farewell.”

Sumaya shared it with us during the research work.



“My brother, the martyr Abdul Rahman, nicknamed Abu Rashid.” Sumaya shared it with us during the research work.



“My little sister is next to my brother’s grave.” Sumaya shared it with us during the research work.



“A photo of my eldest brother and my brother, the martyr Abdul Rahman, in our home in Darayya.” Sumaya shared it with us during the research work.

Our siege... Siege of Darayya

The regime's army began to advance and gain more ground on the areas previously controlled by the Free Army. We left our home and moved to another [stuttering] neighbourhood called Hara... Wait until I asked my father to confirm the name...

It was a neighbourhood inhabited by Al-Sharbaji families... Al-Sharabja neighbourhood, next to Al-Mustafa Mosque. We lived in that house for four years, that is, the entire period of the siege on Darayya until the day of our displacement [silence]. During those years, we could not go to our home, my family's home, because it was under the control of the regime's army. I was using Google Maps to check on it, so I thought it was still intact and not affected by the bombing, but it turned out later that Google Maps was not showing a real-time updated map. Once the maps were updated, I went to the website to see the house and found that it was destroyed and burned down [pause]. All my uncles' houses had also been destroyed. As for Al-Ibaa School, half of it was destroyed and nothing green remained around it.



“A photo of the Al-Ibaa School building after the bombing, burning and destruction.” Sumaya shared it with us during the research work.



“A photo of the Al-Ibaa School building from the inside.”

Sumaya shared it with us during the research work.



“Another photo of the school from the inside.” Sumaya
shared it with us during the research work.

The house I moved to with my family was in a lively area, with many people, shops and a field hospital next to Al-Mustafa Mosque, which made it a targeted area by the regime forces that targeted many hospitals. I remember one time an explosive barrel fell on the emergency area of a hospital and the medical staff and the patients, both men and women, were trapped for long days during which they suffered severely. Therefore, after this incident, and to prevent this from happening again, the Youth dug a tunnel between the mosque and the hospital, so that those inside could exit if it was targeted by regime forces.

Many events occurred during the siege. I will try to remember them [silence], after the martyrdom of my little brother in 2013 [silence]...

At that time, I worked for three months in a field hospital in the Mo-adamiya area. I lived with some of our acquaintances, and my family remained in Darayya... [silence]

I will link all events to the date of my brother's martyrdom in order to maintain a clear chronology.



“The street where we lived during the siege, and these are my little sisters in the picture” Sumaya shared with us during the research work.

I got married in 2014. My husband proposed to me. I remember then that the road to the Moadamiya area had been opened due to the truce that had been called in the area and some food had been allowed. ^{lxxxv} I felt a glimmer of hope. I don't know how I took the decision to get married. The thought of death crossed my mind. I will inevitably die in these conditions of bombing and siege. Perhaps marriage and experiencing it will give me some hope. I got engaged before Ramadan and my wedding was after it. I gave birth to my child after a year of marriage and named him Abdul Rahman.

^{lxxxv} The people of Moadamiya denounce the practices of the regime's media and its forces kill a child, Enab Baladi, March 2014. ([In Arabic](#))

How did I get married during the siege? How did I give birth to a child during the siege? I don't know. Sometimes I say to myself that I was brainless, crazy and I don't know or understand many of the decisions and actions I was taking under siege and bombing.

One of my tasks during the last years of the siege was to protect my child from death. One of the explosive barrels falls near us and I throw myself on top of my son. The barrel explodes. I lie on top of my son until the sound of the explosion and the crackling of shrapnel subsides. When my child sleeps, I sleep close to him, covering his closest ear to me with my chest and the other one with my hand so that he would not be affected by the sound of barrels. The barrel falls and explodes. I remain in my position until the explosion and what follows it end, then I resume sleeping.^{lxxxvi}

lxxxvi [Video Hedocuments Drop off Drums Explosive on Darayya.council thelocal For a city Darayya, August 2016.](#)



Abstract Art of Sumaya trying to protect her child during the bombing.

Despite all this sorrow, fear and disappointment during that period, I regarded myself as an active human being. I was satisfied with myself. I was a wife, mother, sister and teacher of children. I alleviated their worries and rejoiced whenever I saw laughter on their faces. I felt that I was living and persevering for a noble goal: victory and building the future of Syria that we dreamed of. I felt that I was in a blessed land. Many men and women called to congratulate us on our steadfastness and to express their longing for the smell of the country, knowing that the price of staying in Darayya and smelling its scent was very high and had a toll that was reflected in every detail of our daily lives, our bodies and our psyches.

In those times, I was Sumaya who could visit her brother's grave, smell the soil of his grave... [silence]



“During the siege of Darayya, we were teaching children in the basement of a mosque before we started a school that we called Amal Al-Ummah [= Hope of the Nation],”

Sumaya shared with us during the research work.



“The courtyard of the Amal Al-Ummah School [= Hope of the Nation], which is a basement used to store furniture,” Sumaya shared with us during the research work.

In the weeks preceding the displacement, bombing intensified using new, terrifying weapons. There was a weapon we called the “Hose” or explosive hoses. It is actually a hose that is connected to a tank, filled with explosives and launched it on us. It caused severe damage when it hits the ground due to the length of hoses...

“May God destroy their homes. I don’t know where they got this idea from.” [Laughter] ^{lxxxvii}

There is a missile that we called the “Abu Shakhra missile,” which makes a sound like a “snort” or a gasp when it is launched. It was one of the most terrifying weapons to me, as the extent of the destruction it causes is enormous and the possibility of error is wide. The most terrible thing about this missile is that when it is the sky, it modifies its trajectories downwards at an angle of approximately forty-five degrees and reaches even basements. Therefore, to all of us who took shelter in the basements, it was one of the most deadly weapons. What can I tell you about

^{lxxxvii} [Hoses Explosive... Latest Innovations of killing Syrian people by the Syrian regime, Arab new. June 2016.](#)

the napalm barrels? They are a real horror.^{lxxxviii} When they fall, they make a soft sound like “boo” or “hoo.” It may have fallen near you, but you do not know that, and every part of it ignites and causes big fires. We have reached a stage where we prefer explosive barrels over napalm barrels. That is, when the explosive barrel falls, we say, “Thank God, it is not napalm.”^{lxxxix}

We used to spend most of our time in basements, but after the bombing intensified in an unprecedented way, we started to go upstairs. We thought we are dead anyway. It would thus be better that they collect our bodies from the ground than dig up the rubble and looking for them.”

The only tactic we used to deploy when we heard the sound of a missile or barrel was to move away from external rooms to the one in the middle, to avoid the shrapnel. Sometimes we would go down to the basement at night when the bombing intensified, and sometimes we would go down during the day and stay in our homes at night. I don’t know what we were doing, as if we had surrendered our fate to God’s will or that we had been deeply frustrated. On top of all that siege, fatigue and intense bombing, the regime burned most of the crops that the people of Darayya had grown for food and advanced militarily, regaining control over areas one by one.

In the last days of the siege, only two streets separated between us and the regime forces. My husband began praying to God that we all die before the regime forces arrived. We saw what they did to the people of Darayya in the massacre of August 2012, but now the hatred must be stronger after our steadfastness all those years.

lxxxviii [Napalm burning barrels – Ignite neighbourhoods Residential in Darayya!](#), Radio Rosanna, August 2016, (Arabic)

lxxxix [Video from the local council in Darayya documenting the bombing of Darayya with napalm barrels, August 2016.](#)

Can you imagine what they would do to us if they got to us?

My neighbour convened with her husband that in the event the regime forces got to them, he would shoot her and then kill himself.

For few hours daily, the regime forces did not bomb us; They started from dawn prayer call until nine in the morning, the aircrafts did not fly during these hours. So, we used those hours to teach children in the school that was built underground. My mother was the principle and my elder brother was the one in charge of the logistics.^{xc} I remember, before the “reconciliation agreement” by virtue of which we were displaced, that my mother and I were planning to throw a party for children to dispel the atmosphere of death and fear they experienced daily...

We prepared some games in a nearby place and agreed that everything would be done before nine in the morning, the time the daily bombing began.



“An entertainment activity at school because watching television and electricity were a dream for children during the siege period,” Sumaya

shared with us during the research work.

^{xc} [Video Appear in it Sumaya Addressing a letter to the community International To lift the siege on Darayya,council the local in Darayya, April 2016.](#)

Suddenly my brother came in and said: “Stop, by God, you are teaching them these games in Al-Kiswah city?”^{xc}

I told him: “Okay, what’s wrong? Why are you talking like that?”

My brother said: “The local council met at the mosque today and agreed to evacuate Darayya.”

It was a huge shock. I did not understand what my brother said. What is the meaning of an agreement to evacuate the city? I know that the Free Army has no choice but to evacuate with the regime’s forces gaining ground, but just like that? Overnight?

I do not know what the exact terms of the agreement were, but my brother told us that the local council initially requested that men and women civilians remain in Darayya whereas those carrying weapons leave; however, a woman named Kenana representing the regime told them: “Either everyone leaves or a genocide; we would consider all those present as terrorists and we would not care about their age or gender” [silence].^{xc}

The local council agreed to displace all armed men to Idlib and to transfer men and women civilians to the city of Al-Kiswah, which meant that no woman is allowed to go with men to Idlib.

We spent that night saying goodbye to our men. We thought that the reason the regime did not allow women to go with the men was to blow up the buses that would transport them, so we said goodbye to them as if it were the last farewell. The next morning, my brother came to us with different news. He asked us to prepare our stuff, as they allowed the women and children to go with their men who carried weapons to

^{xc} Al-Kiswah is a Syrian city and an administrative district, part of Damascus Countryside Centre, located in the Damascus Countryside Governorate. It is located in Western Ghouta, and the people of Syria call it “Mother of Western Ghouta.” [Wikipedia](#).

^{xc} [Kinanah Hawija from media to Negotiation on displacing the opposition, Radio Rozana, May2018. \(Arabic\)](#)

Idlib. As for whoever wanted to reach a settlement with the regime, they could go to Al-Kiswah in Damascus countryside. This change was made just a few hours before starting displacement, so we agreed that I would go with my father and husband with the first batch of buses, then my brother and the remainder of our family members would come with the second batch.

A flock of migratory birds came

They told us on the day of displacement that we could only take one bag with us. I did not know where to start and what to take with me. I had a lot of stuff. My mother bought me a lot of clothes when I was a bride. Al-Muadamiyah Road opened in 2014 and she was able to go to the market to buy me some clothes (the bridal trousseau). I decided not to take any of those clothes with me and to replace them with clothes and things for my son, so I filled a large bag for him and a small bag with my husband's things. I forgot a lot of important things, a "flash drive" with all our pictures on it, the family notebook and a lot of important things. I remember that the sun was too hot on that day of August 26th, 2016, and the streets were sad. I had a feeling that they were saying: "Where are you going abandoning us?"

I went to my brother's grave to bid farewell to him and to the other martyrs. I left my heart there and headed with the family to the bus assembly area, which was at the end of Al-Basil Street. There were a lot of people, saying goodbye to each other, a lot of bags and "Shwwal"^{xciii}

Part of me was happy that my son would leave this place, he would learn

xciii

Shwwal: A burlap bag used for grains, flour, etc. (Arabic)

about life outside the siege and bombing, but at the same time I was sad that I had to leave Darayya and leave my brother in his grave alone. On the other hand, I was very concerned about my second brother, who would go on the second batch of buses. I had a premonition that the regime would blow up those buses. There were many feelings that I had at that moment.

While I was sitting waiting to board the buses, a flock of migratory birds came. We all looked at it. We thought it was a heavenly message saying that all creatures on earth are migrating. This is how life is and the coming days may be better. We also remembered the Prophet's migration from Medina and how he returned to it victorious, and we hoped that one day we too would return to Darayya with pride and dignity.

We got on the bus. I was with my son, my husband, my father and my mother. An officer came up to take our names. His hands were shaking, and he had a pen and paper. He was extremely nervous. He came towards me and said: "In the name of God upon you." He did not know whether he should say "in the name of God" or "peace be upon you." I felt he was thinking we were from the Al-Nusra Front or ISIS [laughter]. He took my name and everyone's names, the number of weapons the young men were carrying, as it was permissible to take small and medium-sized weapons. The bus left Al-Basil Street. I was happy because I would be able to take a look at where my family's home is. I saw it completely burned down and my uncles' houses were completely destroyed. Many soldiers lined up on both sides of the road and some of them climbed onto the rooftops and made obscene gestures to tease us. We all closed the curtains to ignore them. We arrived at the entrance of Darayya. The bus stopped and some soldiers also came in especially to inspect weapons. There were a lot of media and regime forces and also some people who handed us bread and "Abu al-Walad" cheese.^{xciv}

xciv

(Author)

A type of cheese known in Syria. Its package is round and the cheese inside is shaped like triangles.



Abstract Art of the displacement scene of the people of Darayya on buses.

We left Darayya around noon and arrived at Qalaat al-Madiq at two in the morning. We were accompanied by Red Crescent cars, ambulances to transport injured people, armoured vehicles and above us were two helicopters that accompanied us all the way. The bus only stopped once. It could have arrived in Qalaat al-Madiq in a shorter period of time, but they drove us through regime-controlled areas, Tartous and Latakia, where many people came out to watch us. The bus stopped once, around ten at night and they told us that we could go to the bathroom. I thought we had stopped at a resting place with bathrooms. There was only a vast area with soldiers urinating standing. I was frightened by that sight and went back to the bus. But after a while, I felt like my bladder was going to burst. I took one of my son's diapers and urinated in it. As for the children, including my son, they cried a lot all the way long. They were hungry and bored. The bus never stopped for us to walk with them for a while. The children had thus had their share of torture, as we were, during that journey.

The people and revolutionaries received us at Qalaat al-Madiq with a dazzling reception, as if it were a wedding or a marriage ceremony. They started distributing snacks to the children. Their reaction, when they saw what they got, was heartbreaking: "What is this, juice, biscuits, fruits, wow, chocolate!" During the siege, the children did not taste any of these foods or drinks. Many foodstuffs were lost. A family that cooked rice was considered to be wealthy.

We boarded the bus again until we reached the Atma camps in the north. We all went straight away to the bathrooms after that long and arduous journey. The camp that was allocated to us was made up of buildings, not tents. These were seemingly new, meaning there had been no buildings previously in the camps, and we were the first to live in

those buildings.

From Idlib to Turkey...a journey of tragedies

I felt homesick the moment Darayya left. The situation in Idlib was different from in Darayya. The armed factions were constantly fighting each other, but in Darayya, we were all one soul. There were some minor disputes between the factions in Darayya, but they were united on all fronts. We did not belong to any faction. We lived with each other, ate together, held weddings together and mourned together. I felt that the factions in Idlib were fighting each other over who would be in charge of the displaced people of Darayya, who would take the largest number of their youth in their faction. Such acts had nothing to do with the revolution ideals we fought and lost so much for.

On the other hand, living conditions in Idlib were very bad, job opportunities were not available, education was suffering from severe deterioration, and I felt as if we had moved to another Syria. All of these reasons prompted my husband and I to think about going to Turkey via smuggling roads...and here began a tragedy that I did not expect.

We agreed with a well-known smuggler to smuggle me, my husband and my son, who was ten months old, to Turkey. We paid him a sum of money, amounting to four hundred dollars per person. We never saw that smuggler again. He put us in the hands of a fifteen or sixteen-year-old boy whom they called “the guider,” to lead us throughout the smuggling journey, which took place on October 3, 2016. He told us that we would only walk for half an hour through olive fields. We were ten people, two of us had infants. Having crossed the olive fields, we started

walking through large forests whose paths were steep sloped that we had to climb up one time and climb down sliding at another. They forbade us to use flashlights, so we walked in the dark. They also ordered us to silence our children. We had to walk quickly, because if we fell behind the group, they would leave us alone in the deep forest night. A woman died on the road. I knew her before. They covered her face with a sheet and continued walking...

My hands hurt from carrying my son all the way. My husband could not help me, as he was carrying an elderly woman who had fallen and sprained her ankle. We arrived at a mountain with a road no more than two feet wide. We walked on it until we reached a frightening valley, a deep cliff along which we had to walk very carefully, otherwise we would fall into the cliff. Some people's stuff fell down the cliff and they couldn't do anything about it. I walked that road with my son in my hands and I was praying that God would make our feet steady, as a slip of the foot there meant certain death.

That terrifying road has ended but we had to face a different kind of challenge, a long upward road that we have to overcome running so that the Turkish police (gendarmes) would not notice us. Some of us could not bear all that fatigue. A man in his fifties lay on the ground and began screaming from exhaustion. We begged him to stand up and be silent, but he refused and said that he did not mind being arrested by the Turkish police as he was unable to move. His daughter came and silenced him and helped him stand and walk. My husband, who was a young man in his twenties, fell to the ground from exhaustion after we finished climbing and running, then he got up to continue the journey. When we overcame the hardships of climbing, we had to face a different difficulty - sliding [laughter] down a steep road, full of trees. When I

remember that I laugh and cry. There were ten of us, sliding and bumping into each other. We heard a mobile phone ring coming from afar, so the guide ordered us to stop sliding. Can you imagine what we did to suddenly stop on a steep road? I had handed over my son to my husband before we started sliding. I had given him sleeping pills, but he woke up, as though the medicine had the opposite effect. He started crying. I had to take him from his father to breastfeed him so he would be silent, but there was someone between me and my husband. So, as though I was in a car race, I moved to the right, I overtook that person, and I reached my husband. I took my son, took out one of my breasts for him to breastfeed, completed the slide and then resumed running with a hanging breast while my son was sucking it.

We finally arrived at a flat street after walking continuously for six hours. We crossed that street and went to a place I think it was an animal pen or a horse stable. They told us to wait for a car to come and as soon as it pulls up, we have to run and sit in it within five seconds, otherwise it will leave and leave us. The car actually came, and we raced to it. It was a “double cab” type, that is, it had a rear trunk, but without a roof. We threw ourselves on top of each other and lowered our heads so that the Turkish police would not notice us. Until then, we were still not safe yet, as we could be arrested by the Turkish police if they saw us.

The smuggler took us to his house and told us that the police had known about our presence and that the man who was standing with him was a Turkish officer. We had to bribe him with money so that he would not reports us to the authorities. We believed that lie and my husband gave him one hundred dollars out of the three hundred dollars that we had left. The smuggler felt that we had some money left, so he started blackmailing us and threatening us with being arrested or sent back to Idlib.

My husband understood the game, so he asked to contact a relative of his in Turkey to secure a sum of money, claiming that we had nothing left, but the smuggler remained silent and left us alone.

If I was made to choose between returning to Darayya to live through the siege and bombing and repeating the smuggling journey to Turkey, I would have chosen the first option!

There is no comfort or tranquillity except in that land

After we left the smuggler's house, we went directly to Istanbul. We have some relatives there, so we decided to go there. I first lived in an area called Basaksehir, where most of our acquaintances were based. I looked directly for a job, and I was recruited for a job in an area other than the one in which I was living, "Esenyurt," so we decided to move there. Then my work moved to an area called Bayrampaşa, so we moved there as well, but the owner of the house decided to sell it, so we had to move out to the current house, which we have been living in for ten months. In this place and in my current job as a teacher of the Arabic language and the Islamic religion, I feel that I am Sumaya who is working to develop herself. I want to empower myself for the near or distant future and prepare myself for the moment when I will speak out and when my voice will be heard, and my word will have an impact. I want to be Sumaya who will benefit her community and country in the future. This is my goal that I am working towards despite all the difficulties and situations I encounter in this country.

I do not feel a sense of belonging to the place. I feel alienated whenever I

leave the house, in the streets, on transportation, in the stores. They can distinguish me by the way I wear my hijab. If I wear it as Turkish women do, they do not notice me. However, if I wear it as we Syrian women do, they realise that I am Syrian, then the look and treatment will differ.

One time, I was sitting on the train with my two children, across from me was a Turkish woman who started laughing at my children and complementing them on their looks. But when I spoke with her in Arabic, her facial features changed, and she stopped caressing them. Minutes later, an old man boarded the train, and the woman directly addressed me, telling me that I and my two children should get up and leave the place for the man to sit. The man refused that we leave our seat for him and told her: They are children and have the right to sit. The woman continued talking and told another woman that we Syrian women teach our children to be impolite and disrespectful to adults, knowing that there were many Turkish women with their children on the train, but all the words were directed at me and my two children.

On the bus, the driver once made me choose between silencing my crying child or leaving the bus. My son was tired and started crying, so I played him some videos on the mobile phone in Arabic, but the driver became upset and kicked me out.

Another time, during the first period of my arrival in Turkey, I went to a bank to open an account and put some money into it. I had not yet learned the Turkish language. The employee refused to speak to me in English and kicked me out of the bank in front of thirty or forty customers. How I felt denigrated and how surprised I was that none of the people present tried to stand by me.

I like this country, but I cannot ignore the amount of hatred and racism against Syrians, men and women, here. In this country, I try to develop myself as much as possible. I only have this goal, with the hope of returning to my country one day.

Our home in Darayya is currently inhabited by my aunt. It was completely burned down and most of its trees died. My aunt's house was completely destroyed, and she had no house left to live in, so my father told her to try to renovate the house, repair it or paint it and to live in it as long as we are abroad. This house of ours and the houses of my uncles were inherited from my grandfather. We do not have ownership papers because my grandfather died, and my uncles were unable to complete the inheritance inventory due to the absence of some family members and because of many other complications. My father has other property beside the house, all of which are now in danger of being completely lost and the reason is that my father is wanted by the Syrian regime.

He once tried to go to the Syrian consulate to settle his situation after my uncle told him that he could not have access to his property unless he settled his situation with the regime. My father refuses squarely this settlement, but the family's financial situation is bad. Neither my mother nor my brothers were able to come to Turkey because of the high cost of the trip. Only my father was able to come because of his health condition and the heart surgery he had here. They told him at the consulate that he had to go to Syria to settle his situation there and that the consulate no longer provides such services. My father answered that his health condition did not allow him to go to Syria and that he would try as soon as possible, but he needed to care of something first, so they refused. Then we learned that my father was wanted by the regime and that his

return would mean his direct arrest, so he abandoned his claim to any right he had to his property in Darayya.^{xcv}

I miss our home very much. I described it to you, but that which I cannot describe are the feelings that bind me to it, the memories; I cannot describe them. It would take me months and perhaps years to describe all the feelings and memories I had in that house, during the revolution and during the siege of Darayya. The workshop I received with you encouraged me to write down my memories. I will start writing them down during the annual vacation, even if I only mentioned the headlines. I am only afraid that the details of daily life and the hardships we are enduring now will make me forget the details of the siege period. I feel a responsibility and a desire to write them.

I miss the people and children of the neighbourhood knocking on our door, all day long, to ask about my little brother. I miss the sound of his bike's horn as he returns to us with delicious food [crying].

When I return to my home, I want to hear those knocks and people's questions about my brother who was martyred. I will wait to hear his bike's horn. If I returned, it would be a difficult situation, but it would even be more difficult not to return to Darayya at all.

The crime of forced displacement is cruel, and its effects will be felt across generations to come. I am afraid to die and be buried in Turkey or in any country other than mine. My grandmother died in Syria, and I did not see her. My uncle died and was buried in a cemetery called the Foreigners' Cemetery instead of being buried in the Al-Khawlani Cemetery in Darayya. My children will not play in the gardens of Al-Ibaa's School and will not receive the education I wished for them. They now sit all day in front of the television instead of playing in their family's neighbourhood in Darayya. I try a lot to talk about Syria and Darayya and to describe my home to my two children, but that is not enough.

xcv [From page Consulate Syrian in Istanbul on platform Facebook, advertisement And explain on meaning And steps Settlement the situation For Syrians in Turkey. \(Arabic\)](#)

I feel that part of their identity will be erased if they do not go and see with their own eyes what I am trying to tell them about. Worse still, I cannot guarantee that if they returned, they would find the place as I described it to them, as there are systematic plans to build residential complexes by Iranian companies. This is not new, but something that started in Darayya even before the revolution and even before I was born. They have built a shrine near Al-Khawlani Mosque and named it “Maqam Sakinah”. It was an abandoned house that they turned into a shrine and many Iranian men and women from the Shiite sect visited it. I remember that the people of Darayya welcomed them with open arms and that many began learning the Persian language to speak with them. In addition, the regime gave a special security card to anyone who converted to Shiism (i.e. changed his religious sect from Sunni to Shiite) of those who were working on the international line between Syria and Iran.

I am afraid to go back to Darayya and not find a neighbourhood, a cemetery, or a home. I am afraid to find a place where there is no trace of my memories, my childhood, or my brother.

If I had a conversation with Darayya, I would like to tell her: Forgive us for leaving you, we tried to stay in your arms until our last breath. Forgive us if we caused your destruction, but we had to do what we did in the hope of building you with our own hands... I would say to the Ibaa school: I will come back to you, wait for me, I will come back even if there is only one day left in my life.

As for me, my goal now is to develop myself and gain as much experience and skills as possible so that, one day, I can go to Geneva, for example, to participate in the prosecution of the Syrian regime for war crimes, crimes against humanity and mass massacres that it committed.

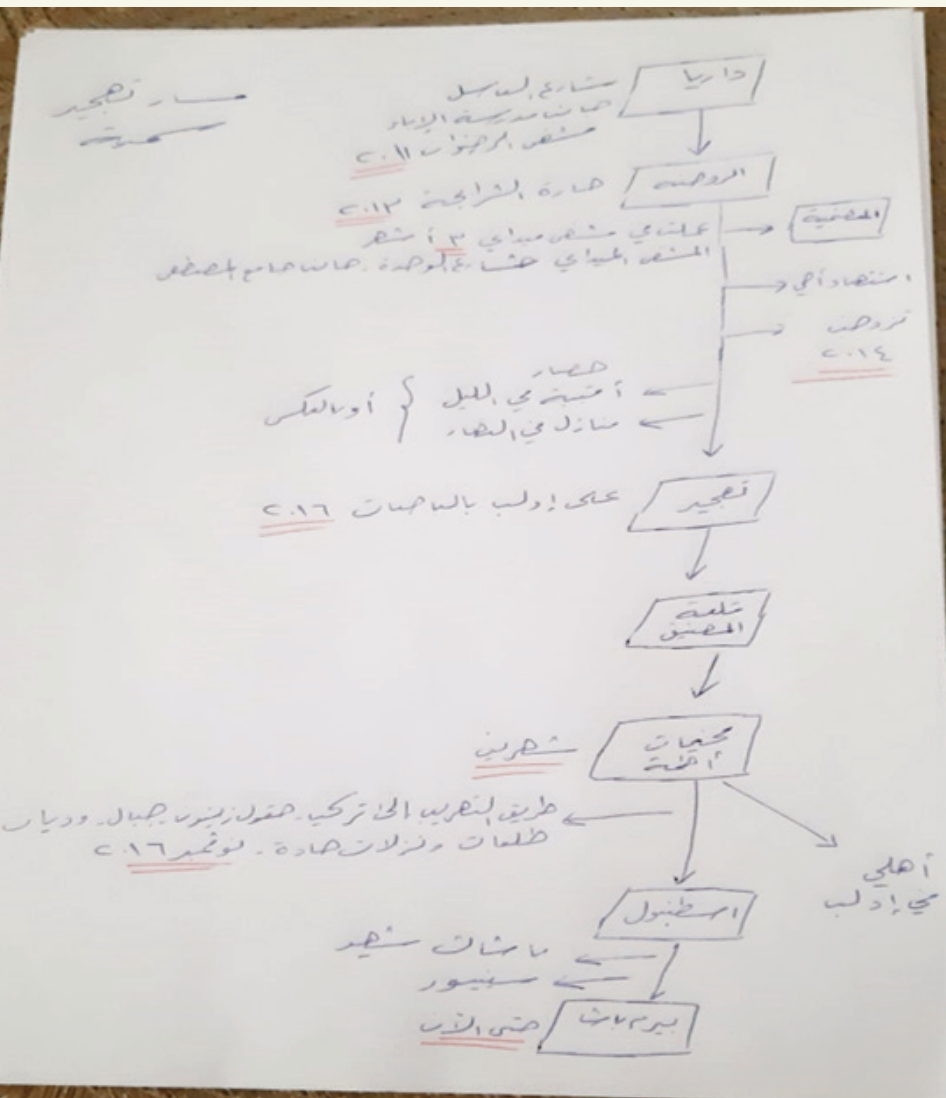
I hope a miracle happens and the Syrian regime leaves Syria along with all foreign forces and Syria returns to its sons and daughters so that we can rebuild it again.

I want for us to return to Darayya safe and sound, voluntarily, with dignity and with love. I do not want to return there by force, nor do I want my goal to be solely to secure a living, as is the case with many people who remained in Darayya or were able to return to it. I want the intellectual leaders, both women and men, to return to raise and lead a free and open generation that can participate in societal and political change for all of Syria.



“The Martyrs’ Cemetery in Darayya, which was razed before leaving Darayya for fear of exhuming the graves by regime forces,” Sumaya shared with us during the research work.

The path of Sumaya Khawlani's displacement until the date of telling her story



Share your journey

*impressions
or thoughts*

My name is

... _____

Story telling date:

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

“ Losing a place is no less important than losing a person. In fact, it is more complex and less noticeable. It often happens to us while we are experiencing other losses. The place has always been treated as soulless and worthless, and saving our lives is our consolation for the loss of the stones... As my mother says. But the loss of a place is a loss worthy of sorrow, as our places are an extension of our souls, part of our identity, and foster our collective memory. The narratives in this book do not only reflect the reality of Syrian women and men but reflect all contexts of forced displacement from any place and at any time. As a Palestinian by father, my Palestinian identity remained incomplete until I was able to visit my family's village in Palestine last year. As a Syrian by mother, my return to my childhood home in the camp of Yarmouk will be part of my justice and the justice of the home and the place and I will ask for it as long as I live.”

Raneem Salama

“ Many of the concepts and terms we hear from those who have lived through the atrocities and injustices of war leave an impact on us even if we have not lived through the same experience, or if we have been fortunate to have been victims of fewer violations. The term “Justice of The Place” and its content in this book made me perceive deeper feelings and be highly aware of the crime of forced displacement, the extent of its cruelty and the brutality and inhumanity of its perpetrators.

What does it mean for them to erase the details of my place, my memories, my people from my life and force me to stay away from them, to collectively destroy everything that I considered self-evident in life... my house, my street, my neighbours, my path?

The stories in this book do not stop at narrating an incident or documenting a violation, but rather they are a unique experience and a new space in which each woman narrates a large part of her life, how her displacement and all the other violations against her affected and continue to affect every aspect of her life and the lives of those around her. This book is a space that did not exist before, where life returns to homes and returns to us. It paints the details of memories for places that no longer exist.”

Lilas Albunni