



## WOMEN IN THE HOLOCAUST OF ALASSAD

### STORY SEVEN

## WHERE IS MY CHILD?

**NOT A NOVEL; THESE ARE CHAPTERS IN STORIES THAT ARE STILL AN ONGOING REALITY - A BLOG BY THE MIZAN ORGANIZATION FOR STUDIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS - BY LISTENING TO THE TESTIMONIES OF LIVING SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS.**



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All the stories written here are true. They have been documented and crafted by their heroines, recounting their stories and those of other heroes and heroines. They represent new chapters in their ongoing reality.

Let us read their documented stories, which were captured in recorded listening sessions conducted by experts and specialists at the Mizan Organization for Studies and Human Rights. They have been written in a unified narrative style, with no changes to the facts, except for necessary literary adjustments to the scenario and some names and places. Modifications were made to protect privacy.

The work took seven months, unlike the months the victims endured in closed and open prisons, with wounds that have not yet healed for them and their loved ones.



## STORY SEVEN

### WHERE IS MY CHILD?

Kidnapping and disappearance, deprivation, torture, and humiliation were not the worst I experienced during my arrest; there was something even more horrific.

**\*\*We used to be happy with our simple life. My husband would come home from work in construction and wash away the fatigue of the day at dinner. We would gather around, and our children would rush towards him in a race to sit in his lap or close to him. Between each bite of food, he would give his children the best pieces**



from the table. He was not interested in public affairs until the Syrian revolution changed him. He began talking more about the injustice people were suffering and reacting strongly to the news of killing and abuse perpetrated by the security forces against civilians. It was even more severe because we lived in an area with a mix of Sunni and Alawite populations. While we used to be neighbors living in love and peace, we were shocked to find that some of them informed the security forces about those of us who sympathized with the revolution. Some went further, carrying weapons and forming groups of shabiha (militia), raiding protests, beating, kidnapping, and killing unarmed youths - along with the security forces.



My husband's zeal increased, and he secretly joined a Free Army battalion formed by some local youths. The shabiha, with the security forces and army, expanded their circle of victims by assaulting women, children, and the elderly during their raids on homes searching for anyone who joined, cooperated with, or sympathized with the Free Army.

My husband was keen not to reveal his involvement. Despite leaving his job to spend most of his days with the rebels in the orchards, he would cover his face with a keffiyeh during the journey to them. One day, he called me, asking me to wait with the children for dinner, even if he was late. He told me he missed them.



While I stayed up until midnight playing with them so they wouldn't sleep before he arrived, our neighbors knocked on my door to inform me that the security forces had arrested my husband and another young man at the town entrance. The news hit me like a thunderbolt. My attempts to contact him or inquire about him were in vain; his phone was off, and although we knew where he was detained, no one in the area dared to mediate on his behalf. They said his charge was terrorism.

My beloved husband Abu Khaled, with his tender heart, tall and straight stature, muscular shoulders, and strong arms, seemed like a piece of reinforced concrete he used to make.



Yet, he carried a heart as tender as his children, whom he had managed for days not to show his tears to. Whenever I noticed, I would ask him, and he would talk about the torture and abuse faced by detainees, both men and women. Today, he is one of them, driven by his zeal to carry arms in defense of the protesters and them. My husband and beloved Abu Khaled was the center of my life. His love filled my emptiness, and it was enough for me to worry about household and children's needs. For the first time, he left me alone. In the recent months, while he worked with the Free Army in defense of people, we exhausted our savings, and my children went to bed hungry. Although the people in my town occasionally





sympathized with me by asking and bringing some necessities, I decided to rely on myself. I became a street vendor, borrowing goods from a wholesaler who was a friend of my husband, and I paid him when I sold the goods in the town houses I visited. I left my thirteen-year-old daughter at home to take care of her siblings and returned in the evening, exhausted, to another form of hardship. I spent the night with my little ones, consumed by grief, sorrow, and worry about my husband, with nightmares that never left me. I saw him in the form of those who had spoken to me about the detainees. His news was completely cut off from us, and whenever I asked anyone about him, they



would say to get used to this situation, as they likely killed him.

After five months, I learned about the release of one of the young men. I rushed to his house, eager to ask about my husband. The new lease on life he gave me when he confirmed that Abu Khaled was alive and had not died. I held onto the hope of his release, waiting for eleven months, constantly praying with certainty that we would reunite. My prayers were answered at the beginning of Ramadan when Abu Khaled was finally with us. He came out with a silent smile on his face, and a look of tenderness in his beautiful eyes that overshadowed the signs of torture evident on his health. He constantly



asked me to forgive him for the hardship, anguish, and pain he had caused me, promising that he would not engage in any activities with the Free Army to avoid leaving us again.

My husband resumed his work in construction, and our happiness was indescribable. Every evening, he returned home with sweets and dinner for the children, wanting to make up for what they had missed and erase the memories of fear and sorrow from our lives. But we were not destined to live safely in our homeland together. On the first day of Eid, they raided the town with a large-scale operation. From our windows, we saw vehicles and more than fifty



security personnel fill our street. Our concern was primarily for our neighbors. It never occurred to us that our house would be raided, given that my husband had not acted, spoken, or uttered a word against them after his release. Yet, they forcibly broke down our door, entered our home with their weapons, and arrested my husband and our son Khaled.

I forgot about my husband and rushed to the officer, pleading with him to release my child. I told him that Khaled was only ten years old and left the house only for school. I asked him to let him go and begged him not to take him. I held on to my son, pulling him away from their grasp, while my daughter, who had been taking care



of him, clung to him, crying. Without mercy, they kicked her until she crashed into the wall, and then they started cursing me, threatening to take my daughter too if I didn't keep quiet.

My anguish and suffering from my husband's initial detention were nothing compared to now, as he was with them along with my dear son. For three days, I later heard that my husband managed to escape from them at the Turbah checkpoint in Qatana. I could hardly believe it, knowing the dangers and severe torture reported at that checkpoint. My fear for my son overshadowed my joy at my husband's escape. As I had expected, they raided our house barbarically, searching and asking questions.



I composed myself and answered their question, "Where are they, Saleh and his son?" with relief. I had believed from the phrasing of the question that my son Khaled, with his father, had escaped from them.

I said, "Aren't they with you? You took them!" One of them replied, "No, they escaped from us, and you know where they are hiding." I said, "They haven't come here, and I don't know anything about them. I don't believe they escaped."

The officer pointed to one of them, who hit me on the head, and they dragged me to one of their cars. Inside, they handcuffed me and blindfolded me, taking me to what I later learned



was the Military Security Branch. They put me in a long staircase leading to an underground basement, pushed me into a cell, and locked the door for two days. No one spoke to me. They brought me out, blindfolded and shackled, for interrogation. I swore that I knew nothing about my husband's whereabouts after he and my son were arrested, but they did not believe me. They repeated that I was lying and called me the worst names, threatening to do terrible things to me. They beat me brutally, breaking my leg, and tortured me until I lost consciousness. Each time I awoke, it was to another round of torture and humiliation for fifteen days, with no answers about my husband's whereabouts. They then moved me



from the solitary cell to a dormitory with a group of women. Even though I felt some comfort with them, I remained too scared to talk or answer their questions. I stayed in that condition for three months until I was released.

When I was released from detention, I learned that the kind people of my town had raised money for me and paid it to a broker close to the security forces to mediate for my release. During that time, the neighbors took care of my young children. I also learned that the patrol that arrested me had burned down our house, including all our belongings, before leaving. They also burned the homes of my husband's relatives after vandalizing them.





At the Military Security Branch's entrance, my uncle, my husband's father, met me with one of our town's notable figures who had made efforts to secure my release. He kissed me on the head, handed me my daughter and youngest son, and pointed to a car at the end of the street, telling me to use it to go where my husband was staying. He warned me that I would not be safe in the town and feared that I might be arrested again. Without further discussion, I clung to the hope of reuniting with Khaled and Abu Khaled. My daughter was under my wing, and my youngest son was in my arms as we got into the car heading towards Khan Shaykhun. The driver, accustomed to the route, handed money to the checkpoint



personnel at each checkpoint, money collected by the kind people of our town. I was still suffering from a fear of speaking, so I did not talk to him, only relying on my uncle's words that I would be safe with my husband.

And indeed, we arrived in Khan Shaykhun. The Free Army fighters were there, with no shabiha, intelligence agents, or regime army. It was a new hope for living safely with my family. My husband embraced me, and the deep sadness in his eyes tempered the joy of our reunion. I asked him about Khaled.

He held me again to his chest, hiding his tears from me. I looked at his face and asked him where Khaled was. He bowed his head, crying



without answering. I slapped myself and him on the chest, screaming at him to tell me where Khaled was. Was he still detained with them? How could you leave him behind when you escaped with them?

He answered through sobs mixed with a faint, sad voice, 'I didn't know they had detained him with me. I didn't know he was beside me while I was trying to escape them. I deceived the guards at the checkpoint at night, hit three of them, knocked them down, and sneaked through the wilderness until I reached the liberated areas. I didn't know I had left my son with them. I continued to plan to bring you all until I learned from the people of the town that



Khaled was detained with them. I learned that the cowards, less than an hour later, took him in another car that followed the patrol that had arrested me. I didn't know they had taken him with me. They put me in the car alone, and until I escaped from them, I didn't see him or hear his voice. The cowards hid him from me.'

Their hell continues to haunt me. With every torment I think is the worst, they invent a form of torture even more severe. I woke from my stupor with an IV drip in my hand, trying with difficulty to gather my memory to understand where I was. I thought I was still in detention. No, I was not in detention; the place was



clean, and the doctor was kind. He smiled at me while rechecking me, saying, 'The worst is over, Umm Khaled.' I looked at my husband and saw that his teeth were broken and a deep wound marked his face from the torture. I seemed not to have noticed this when we met yesterday. We embraced again, and this time, there was no talk, only weeping. We both thought of our son Khaled.

In Khan Shaykhun, there was no fear of arrest pursuing us, but the dangers of death from shelling constantly threatened us. We lived with our pain for four years until the regime, with the help of the Russians, pursued us there, leading to a new mass



displacement to Idlib. There, my husband took care of treating my broken leg from the torture in detention. He accompanied me to Turkey, where I managed to alleviate some of my disability and pain by having a joint replacement and plates inserted. We then returned to the north to live in Ariha, where once again, we were targeted by shelling. Our rented house was turned into a mass of flames, and we lost our simple belongings and all our official documents. Fearing for our two children, we decided to move, this time to Afrin, where the threat from air raids was less than in other liberated areas. Abu Khaled, who no longer left the house, increased his suffering over Khaled. Amid his feelings of



self-blame, longing, anxiety, and sorrow, he developed a heart condition. The doctors advised him to avoid exertion and stress, but how could he, when we had no source of income other than his work to survive? How could he, when his worry about our child never left his mind? His once sturdy body and fiery spirit were no longer the same. I, who used to rely on him, now had to comfort him. I remember him from the past, his hands stronger than the iron used in reinforced concrete, and his heart like a rock, unafraid of death. His story of overcoming the fiercest monsters at the Turbah checkpoint in Qatana and escaping them proves that he did not know the impossible. His friends talk about



his heroism, including the time he planned during his last detention—while being taken for torture—a way to surprise them with his solo attack. My heroic husband turned the chains in his hands from shackles to weapons to defend his dignity. He seized the opportunity when they mocked him at night to knock three of them to the ground and escape. He was not defeated by his torture, nor did their detention weaken his resolve. But now, he is tormented by thoughts of what has happened to us since then: their arrest and torture of me, their abduction of our eldest child Khaled and hiding him, our displacement, illness, poverty, longing for family, anxiety about our child, the instinct for





revenge combined with helplessness, self-blame and regret at times, frustration, the loss of grand dreams, and many other things that have affected my heroic husband's will and weakened his health.

As I sit beside him, I cry for our son, away from him so as not to burden him. I update him on the news I see, hoping to restore hope to him. With every news story or event I see on TV, I search for any sign that might lead me to my son. I heard at the beginning of the year that the UNICEF Director visited Faisal Mekdad, the regime's Foreign Minister. They said she is responsible for childhood issues. I wonder if she knows that they have detained



my little one. I appeal to her to ask them about him during her meeting with them. I follow, like others, the paths of normalization with the Assad regime. While I still hold hope in the Turks, Arabs, and Westerners, I plead with them to 'demand my son from Assad before giving him the honor of meeting him, and I would sacrifice my life for them.' Who will convey my voice that, like all mothers and fathers, I search in the news for a light that reveals my son's fate and returns my beloved child? Who will convey my voice that I will not forgive otherwise?



To ensure that the truth is not lost and that they are not left alone, and for those who still endure similar pains, for their justice, and to guarantee that those involved in their suffering are held accountable, and to prevent a repetition of what has happened and is still happening to them, the Mizan Organization for Studies and Human Rights—voluntarily and in collaboration with survivors—has worked on documenting, drafting, and publishing seven testimonies from survivors of the Assad Holocaust. These testimonies remind us of their issues and the issues of those still in detention, calling on the peoples and governments of the world not to contribute to any settlement that bypasses the necessary requirements of justice needed to build sustainable peace.

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