

# Iraqi Women After the War

■ Hazem El-Amin

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And now, after the dust of the momentous shift from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to a new, still undefined Iraq, has started to settle, Iraqi women have started their soul searching all over again. But their past wounds have

barely started healing when other wounds started to crack open; wounds from stories that occurred throughout the past decades, stories we are well familiar with, but avoid talking about because of our humanitarian weakness. And these stories we know are just a small part of what really happened.

As soon as Fatmeh entered Jalal's room, most of the friends who had been waiting for her failed to recognize her; she had become a

middle-aged, plump, and veiled woman. When her friends had left her, she was a young, beautiful woman, and the most life-loving member of the group. There she

stood before her longtime friends, whom she never replaced after they all left Baghdad, fleeing imprisonment.

The time they took to scrutinize her was long and solemn. Once they recognized her and rushed to embrace her, Fatmeh started crying. It wasn't the kind of loud crying we're familiar with, but rather, a silent weeping that made her entire body shake. It was the first moment in over 24 years – the time they had been apart – and it was like seeing herself in a mirror, as she realized what had befallen her all these years. She didn't tell them much about those years that she lived alone, far from them in that Iraq. She said that she wore the veil because it was the only protection she could have after her friends had left, and that she had put on weight because time had gone by.

The story of Fatmeh is a slow one, devoid of blood, death, murder, and it did not end in a mass grave. But it ate away the soul of this lady, just as death eats away the body.

The lives of Iraqi men and women are laden with daily bits of reality like this and even worse. Abdullah, who

recently returned to Baghdad, says that if many remained alive, it was only by accident. He believes that those who remained in Iraq under Saddam's rule have lost their ability to reach out to others. Abdullah says that when he met again with his sister, who had been the closest person to him before he fled Iraq, he found her to be almost a complete stranger, with nothing in common with the person she had been. He felt that something had died between them.

The recurring stories in Iraq have no end. For instance, there is the story of the lady who hid her sons for nearly twenty years in a room she fixed below her home, after they had been sentenced to death. She took them food and water every day, for twenty years, in that mud room underneath her house. This story seems normal to Iraqis. For twenty years, this lady regularly paid visits to the security authorities asking about her sons, so that they wouldn't have any suspicions about her and to avoid having them come to her house to investigate.

If Iraqi women were busy under Saddam's rule protecting themselves or covering up for their sons, husbands, and brothers, who could be sent to the front to kill and fight, or be imprisoned or executed, they don't seem to fare any better today.

Today, women in Iraq occupy an abstract place in the public mind. There are many indications of this, as fear from women is only equaled by the fear over them, and they are always subject to a general existential delirium. It is no coincidence that Iraqis keep repeating stories about US soldiers having binoculars that allow them to see through women's clothes and show their naked bodies. These stories no doubt aimed at instigating feelings of hostility against the American presence in Iraq, but those who started them know very well how much they can affect Iraqis and create fears about the Americans.

## Targeting Women

Ishtar Jassem El Yassiri was in a narrow office, at the newspaper where she worked in Baghdad when the air conditioning suddenly shut down. It took no time before a heat wave flooded into the narrow room, where a number of editors were working on four of the newspapers that have appeared since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Ashtar, who had her hair covered with a scarf that brought out the greenness of her eyes, was the only woman in the room.

There are many women reporters in Iraq, but the lack of security that struck the country after the war has forced many of them to stay home. Ishtar, however, says that it's not the lack of security that will stop her from working. Most of the time her father or brother accompanies

her whenever she leaves her house, which is something they never had to do before the war. She considers that the calls that are beginning to warn women to wear conservative garments will not force her to neglect her work and her personal progress. She says: "We are an Islamic country, but no one can force us to wear something we don't like. No group has the right to determine what we need to do."

The conservative calls are not the only thing worrying Ishtar and Iraqi women in general. The rising number of cases of abuses of girls and women, physically and sexually, is very worrying to Iraqi families and has terrified them. This has pushed a group of university students in Baghdad to create a committee for the protection of students.

A few months after the fall of Saddam Hussein, there are still no accurate statistics on the number of women and girls who have been victims of physical and sexual abuse. This is because most victims never notify the authorities and never even resort to medical care.

The lack of security in the Iraqi capital and other cities has an obvious impact on the daily lives of women and girls, hindering their participation in public life at this decisive time in the country's history. A story such as that of Saba, who is not yet nine years old, helps to explain why many families have stopped the girls and women in their families from working or leaving the house without a male escort. In May, Saba went out of her house. She hadn't gone beyond the stairs of her building that she was abducted and taken to a nearby building, where she was raped. Later on, one of the neighbors found her sitting on the stairs bleeding, so she was taken to an American medical center, where an American woman doctor examined her and confirmed that she had been raped.

This case is just one of the few documented cases about violence against women in Iraq, as many women are afraid to talk about what happened to them and as such it is impossible to have an accurate record of these cases.

According to the *Women's Freedom Organization* in Iraq, which was formed after the fall of Saddam, there are dozens of Iraqi women who were killed by their own relatives, ever since US President George Bush announced that he was going to wage his war on Iraq last May. This

*I live in daily fear, I don't have a single doubt that my father and brothers will kill me and my husband if they find us.*

organization wrote to Paul Bremer, the American administration's civil governor, denouncing the wave of crimes against Iraqi women, including rape, abduction and honor crimes, but the group never received any response from the American official.

In Baghdad, where five million people reside, there are around 5,000 US trained officials. Under Saddam's rule, the rate of crime was low, mainly because the sanctions were extremely harsh and included capital punishment by hanging or firing. But today, car thefts, rape, armed burglary, and murders are widespread. This burst of violence could be explained by the fact that Saddam Hussein released 100,000 prisoners last October, including criminals and members of gangs. Today, with the

return of electricity and water, the lack of security is the number one reason for the Iraqis' resentment towards the American forces.

Last May, 463 people were taken to the morgue of Baghdad. Around eighty percent of them had died from gunshots, including some who died during celebrations. The number of casualties rose to 626 in June, to 751 in July, and 872 in August.

According to Amal, who is a 33-year-old woman: "Today, security is the greatest problem to us women in Iraq." She is on the run, fleeing from her brother and father who vowed to kill her. Amal adds: "Crimes against women are on the rise, because of the absence of law and order, and because of the presence of Islamic radicals who believe that a woman has no value, and because of those whose power has increased."

Amal realized that one day she would have to face her family's revenge, because she ran away three years ago with Ali, whom she fell in love with and later married. Ali had asked for her hand in marriage, but her family refused because he was divorced. After they married, Ali and Amal fled to the Kurdish stronghold in the North of Iraq, and settled there and had a daughter. The husband of Amal's sister divorced her because of the "shame" Amal brought upon her family. But in the Kurdish environment, Amal felt safe because she doubted that anyone from her family would have the courage to violate the travel ban that was imposed by the regime of Saddam Hussein and go to the North to take revenge on her.

But Amal's life quickly disintegrated after the war, as she no longer feels safe since Iraqis from Baghdad have now access to the North. She must remain on the run with her husband, changing her place of residence continuously, for fear of being pursued by her family. "I live in daily fear," she says, "I don't have a single doubt that my father and brothers will kill me and my husband if they find us."

Translated by Lynn Maalouf



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

# The Case of Samar Alami

## ■ Diana Mukalled

Television producer and presenter, Future TV

In one of the cells of the high-security Holloway prison in North London, Samar Alami waits for eleven years to pass, having already spent nine years of her life there.

She was barely 31 when British courts sentenced her and her friend, Jawad Botmeh, for involvement in the 1994 bombing in London of the Israeli embassy and the Balfour House, both of which injured nineteen people.

Today Samar is 39 years old. Like Jawad, she graduated from a British university. They are both accused of affiliation with a small, radical group headquartered in Britain, which planned to foil the Middle East peace process. Both Samar and Jawad have strongly refuted this accusation.

They were condemned in 1996, even though the case was closed, the issues were not all resolved. In fact, to this day many questions remain unanswered. In recent years, new evidence and facts have appeared that indicate that intelligence services, security services, and maybe even governments were involved in this case, even though the accusations were limited to these two young people, who embody the suffering of the

Palestinian people at home and abroad. Their story remains a mystery, reminiscent of a detective story; in this case, however, many secrets are meant to be kept as such.

Samar Alami is a Palestinian girl from Gaza, born of a Lebanese mother from the Osseiran family. She was born in 1965 in Lebanon, where she lived until her early twenties. Her father Sami was the head of the Arab Bank in Beirut. She enrolled at the American University of Beirut, and then moved to Britain where she obtained a BA and then a MSc in chemical engineering from Imperial College. She is highly educated and, during her studies, was known to be a fervent activist on issues related to women's rights, the Palestinian cause, and human rights in general.

But today Samar is secluded at the Holloway prison, where visitors are allowed only three times a month. Her elderly parents and her twin sister Randa have moved to London to stay close to her.

Time goes by very slowly in prison. Samar spends it doing various prison activities, working at the library, studying, as well as reading and drawing.

When I met Samar in prison, she seemed younger than her age and not very different from the photos I had seen of her. Despite her faith in her innocence, it wasn't easy bringing her to talk about the case in which she is paying the price for an act she did not commit.

"Jawad and I have been in prison since the beginning of 1995, for a case we have no relation to at all," she says. "All that links us to it is the fact that we tried to defend our people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and this right and duty were exploited to make us appear as terrorists. They twisted everything we did and thought in a manner that would make us appear as the ones responsible for the bombing of the Israeli embassy. But we have nothing to do with this."

According to Samar and Jawad, the Israeli embassy bombing in London could not serve their goal. The Palestinians' experience in the 1970s, with all the acts of aggression in Europe, failed to explain the reality of the Palestinian cause. That is why the conviction came as a surprise to them. During the court sessions, Samar went to court carrying a red flower. She was convinced that her innocence and that of Jawad were obvious. She wasn't worried that the case would reach the point it did. "The second the sentence was announced was the worst thing that could happen to me. I had the feeling right before that something wrong was about to happen. It was a terrible moment. Twenty years fell upon me like a cold shower, when the judge announced the sentence. Yes, I was expecting them to try and blame us, but I didn't expect things to reach this point."

The sentence of Samar and Jawad appeared logical, even necessary, to many people. "The evil couple," the "two bombers," the "terrorists," "the salon revolutionaries" (in reference to their cultural and social background): Samar and Jawad were given many names in the press. Any hint that they could be innocent or that there could be a flaw in the trial seemed like abuse, amidst this media campaign.

The prominent British lawyer Gareth Peirce, who is extremely active in the defense of human rights issues, believes in the innocence of Samar and Jawad. Peirce, like numerous other people, is firmly convinced that a great mistake was made. She handled several previous cases that later were shown to involve miscarriages of justice. Her most important case was one that shook British public opinion in the late 1980s, that of the Gilford Four and Birmingham Six, named after the cities where nightclubs were blown up, killing scores of people.

This case was turned into the hit movie, released in the early 1990s, called "In the name of the Father." Several

Irish people were accused of carrying out these bombings in London nightclubs and were sentenced to fifteen to twenty years in prison; in the end, it appeared that there had been a miscarriage of justice, after the accused had spent their full terms in jail. Peirce proved the innocence and the error of the trial, in a series of famous sessions that were fraught with political meddling.

Just as Peirce was convinced of the innocence of her clients in the Irish case, she is today convinced of the innocence of Samar and Jawad. She has tried to prove their innocence since the beginning, in collaboration with the defense team.

According to her, as in many cases in which people were mistakenly convicted, people who usually don't know, who have limited experience, and who cannot help themselves are those who are usually innocent. To this day, she explains, we still don't know who carried out the bombing, and we still don't know what the political motives were. "What I am absolutely convinced of is that Samar and Jawad did not carry out these bombings," she says.

During the two-year investigation, it appeared that Samar and Jawad had rented a storage box in the Nationwide self storage building, west of London. In the box were found chemical materials and TATP power to fabricate explosives and two pistols as well as various publications, magazines, and books. But it was proven that the material found in the storage box was not the same as that used for the embassy bombing.

Samar and Jawad maintained that the quantities of material found in the storage were very limited and were intended for making bomblets. According to Samar, they were meant to be used in the Occupied Territories, not in Britain. They said that a person had given them the explosives material and then disappeared. That person remains unidentified to this day. There are in fact several aspects of the case that remain mysterious. For instance, the kind of explosives used in both incidents is not known. The material found in the storage box could not have been used for the bombings, given the latter's advanced technology. It is not known where the explosives were made. Many fingerprints were found, but the identities of the persons remain unknown.

The woman who drove the car that carried the explosives was not Samar. The bombing was extremely precise and didn't leave any trace of timing equipment or detonators.

The case was long and the story complicated, said the court judge. It's like assembling the pieces of a large jigsaw puzzle, where most of the pieces are lost. No one

knows who's responsible for the bombings. There are many questions to which the court judge responded: "Simply, we don't know." Two years after the bombing, the judge ruled that the evidence was "all circumstantial."

All the other suspects were cleared, except Samar and Jawad. Judge Garland at the Old Bailey court described the ten weeks of the trial as like "trying to hold on to soap in the bathtub."

Samar and Jawad insisted on their innocence, but the jury found them guilty. Jawad did confess that he was involved in buying both the car that blew up and the chemical material used to make the explosives. As for Samar, she confessed to having been involved in making the explosives. The judge accused them of starting a war in London and of carrying out terrorist acts. Samar and Jawad were friends. Their political activism against Israel was public and obvious. The prosecutors considered this activism as evidence of their involvement in terrorist activities.

Peirce believes that because the prosecutors decided to convict Samar and Jawad, they dropped the charges against other suspects. But questions remain, she adds, as to which party this bombing served and in whose interest it was? "It was always too easy to say that these two people were against the peace process and that this was all the case was about. Despite this, the sentence was imposed in this simplistic way to account for the bombing."

When Samar's house was searched, the police found a sketch map of Sidon, with her fingerprints on it. The map had been drawn by Randa, Samar's sister when she had wanted to visit friends there. The police and the prosecutors insisted that the map depicted the area where the Balfour House was located, in north London.

Peirce traveled to Lebanon and to Sidon specifically to check the map drawn on a notebook, and she returned with evidence that destroyed this evidence in court. Peirce considers this as a sample of the details which the police used to try to avoid having the real culprits incriminated.

#### **Incarceration**

Between 1992 and 1993, Samar and Jawad started considering ways to support the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian resistance inside the occupied territories.

"I used to view myself as a Palestinian living and studying in Britain," says Samar. "At the same time, I was trying to use my presence here in order to build strong rela-

tions with people and familiarize them with the Palestinian cause. I felt I was part of a people, and I tried with Jawad to contribute to changing the reality and confronting the suffering and injustice."

Samar and Jawad tried to think of ways to make home-made explosives, to teach Palestinians in the territories how to produce them to help them in the resistance. They were considering sending information on this material to the Occupied Territories and publishing it there, once they learned how to make these explosives.

These experiments became a major part of incriminating evidence against them during the trial, even though there was never proof of a link between these experiments and the actual bombing. Samar and Jawad tried to devise home-made explosives from material that could be found in any kitchen or grocery store. They conducted tests with materials that wouldn't be prohibited by Israeli censors, such as nail polish remover, hair dye, or shampoo.

Samar says: "There was nothing remarkable about what we were thinking about. All that we meant to do was to help develop the means of resistance. Our experiments were minor and basic. By all means, they were only modest attempts."

Peirce believes that what the two young people did was naïve, but had nothing to do with bombing the Israeli embassy: "There is no doubt, and Samar and Jawad agree with me, that many things they did were extremely stupid. This is not to incriminate them morally or politically, but simply to say that they exposed themselves to a great danger as a result of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of their attitude. Their former interests were like the kiss of death in their case. The truth is that they had common interests and individual ones; and their preparations of defensive weapons meant to be used in the Occupied Territories took up half the defense work in their case. All this needed to be clarified. The jury had no understanding whatsoever, and had no idea of international politics, except from a narrow perspective regarding the Palestinians, one close to the Israeli perspective."

The fate of Samar and Jawad was also linked to this case through a mysterious person they met in 1992. That man, whom they say bought with Jawad chemical explosive materials and convinced Samar to stock them for him, disappeared a few days before the bombing and never resurfaced. Two years prior to the embassy bombing, Samar and Jawad had met that person, who claimed his name was Rida Mughrabi. *The Independent* published a sketch of that man; the paper's correspondent Robert Fisk visited the two accused in the company of a



professional artist, who took from them the description of the so-called Mughrabi Samar and Jawad said the sketch resembled the man.

Mughrabi claimed that he was from the West Bank, that he had taught at a refugee camp in Jordan and fought the Israelis in South Lebanon in the early 1980s. He said he left Lebanon after a disagreement with the PLO. He worked in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and then moved to Birmingham in Britain after the Gulf war. Samar and Jawad never wondered why that person had suddenly appeared in their lives. Their meetings with him were infrequent and took place in London cafés. He was the one who called them, and they never met him in his own place or met anyone he knew. Samar and Jawad clung to him because of the time he had spent in Israeli jails and his work with the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon. Or at least, that's what he claimed.

In 1993, Mughrabi began discussing with Samar and Jawad weapons that could be made available to the Palestinians inside the Occupied Territories. In March 1994, they started talking about techniques to make explosives. Neither Samar nor Jawad ever openly discussed with Mughrabi their experiments, but he seemed to have hands on experience in that field. He talked in an interesting way about things that had happened, and implied that he had gained his practical experience during Israel's invasion of Lebanon.

According to Samar, "Rida Mughrabi is confusing. At first, we felt that he was part of the national Palestinian movement. We felt that he had hands on experience, and that's what pushed us to work with him; but the truth is that we were wrong in dealing with people without taking enough precautions. That person put us in a situation we have nothing to do with, and disappeared." Samar and Jawad believe that Rida Mughrabi set them up in an intelligent way.

As for Peirce, she believes that the British police did not make enough efforts to investigate Mughrabi, saying "the police is not interested at all in Rida Mughrabi; they claim that such person does not exist. There are people involved in acts of aggression, and have not been tried. There was clearly a person who signed the name of George Davis, who was involved in buying the cars, and it was clear that a person called George Davis was involved in other activities. It is clear that a woman, or a man disguised as a woman, parked the car near the Israeli embassy, and it was admitted that none of these people were the accused. So it's neither Samar nor Jawad."

In March 1994, Samar attempted new experiments, but

she failed and this failure led to an incident with Rida Mughrabi. They met and she told him about her failure in making an explosive out of acetone and hydrogen. Her last contact with him was on July 13, 1994, two weeks before the embassy bombing. He asked to see her, and they met on a street in London. He said that he had carried out some experiments and had something that could help her which he wanted to give her. Samar says that she acted against her instinct at that moment, and felt that things were going in the wrong direction. She hesitated, but ended up accepting two boxes from him, which she carried from his car to hers. The box included TATP, which is used for explosives, and there were also timers and other things.

Rida said that he was leaving and, after he gave her the two boxes, she never saw him again. He disappeared. Samar speaks about her last meeting with him, in a very distrustful way, saying: "It was a very strange encounter. There are many people who come to Britain and leave things behind. But what was stranger was his hesitation when he gave me the boxes. At first, I thought it was unnatural. I was bothered by the fact that usually, I don't act in such a naïve way, but I thought that maybe he was going through some important phase and had something on his mind. I felt that something was wrong, but I didn't give it enough thought, and I ended up keeping with me something I never should have kept."

Samar and Jawad decided to put the two boxes temporarily in an empty apartment belonging to a relative of hers. They later rented under false names a storage box at the Nationwide self storage, and put the two boxes there. Jawad added: "Up to that point, we had only been experimenting with negligible quantities, in my kitchen; but in one day, the quantities changed, and even though they weren't considerable, they marked a qualitative leap from what we were familiar with, as far as what they were and what they could do. So we decided to put them in a storage box, wanting to get rid of the material as quickly as possible."

Five months passed between the date of the bombing and their arrest. But neither Jawad nor Samar could decide to get rid of the storage box or its contents; instead, they hid some books and notes related to their experiments. According to Samar: "We were afraid there would be a reaction similar to what happened during the Gulf war [1991] when people were being randomly arrested. It was a period filled with questionings and confusion regarding the embassy bombing, and the real motive. Also, my encounters with Rida further raised my doubts, but we didn't know what we should do."

The prosecution considered that what had been discovered in their storage box was what was left of the chemical material that was used to make the explosives. But the investigations didn't prove that the material that was found in the storage, and specifically the TATP, was used in the explosion, and the courts' experts even doubted this hypothesis, saying that TATP is an unstable material that was not suitable for that purpose. The court finally decided that there was a unanimous agreement that this material hadn't been used in either of the two bombings.

Rida Mughrabi disappeared, leaving big question marks behind. According to Samar, not only did he leave many questions, but he also left her and Jawad in an insecure situation: "We did not participate in the embassy bombing operation; it's not that we don't want to confess, it's because we really have no relation with it, and Rida Mughrabi left us in a situation that we are not responsible for in any way."

Officials from the anti-terrorist branch testified during the trial that there was a flaw in the investigations regarding this case. There was a lot of talk about Israeli security fears. It was noteworthy that the day the sentence was issued, the media that usually talked about the need to tighten security around Jewish centers decided to focus on Jawad and Samar, depicting them as individuals hostile to Jews. Suddenly, they focused on the fact that Samar had participated in a public meeting in London, where Shimon Peres had spoken.

The press and the prosecution presented this as if Samar had gone to the meeting to determine the target of her attack. Peirce says: "It is clear that the Israeli embassy was the target of the bombing. The embassy's staff were prosecution witnesses, and whatever cooperation they had in this case, it was exclusively between the Israelis, the prosecution and the British scientists. We still believe that we were not given a full report on what the Israeli experts found when they went to the scene of the bombing. It is worth noting that Israeli scientists visited the crime scene, and not only that, but they also interviewed eyewitnesses, which is understandable. But the prosecution didn't do anything similar, and did not interrogate any witnesses. That is why, to this day, there are certain aspects of the scientific investigation that could help in elucidating this case, and they are neither in the hands of the prosecution, nor are we aware of them."

The case did not end in 1996 with the prosecution of Samar and Jawad; the defense lacked significant information during the trial, and later during the appeal. Several closed hearings were held under the Law on

Public Interest Immunity (PII), which gives the government the authority to withhold certain evidence in order to protect national security. These sessions were used to keep secret information related to evidence that could benefit the defense, including information that the British intelligence had about a warning the Israeli embassy received before the incident. This information had been withheld from the defense. The sessions also prevented the disclosure of information related to the investigations of the British and Israeli government regarding the two explosions. The sentence was issued, even though this information remained secret.

Secret intelligence reports also mentioned the possibility that the attack against the Israeli embassy could be part of the secret war between Iran and Israel or even done by Israel. Information leaks caused this speculation, based on the ease with which the attack was carried out against the embassy. Were the Israelis trying to highlight the frailty of their security, after the British authorities had refused to enhance the embassy's protection and had prohibited Mossad from working on its territory?

In 1999, the court of appeal held a secret session in the presence of the public prosecution. During the session, the public prosecution confirmed the truth that the British intelligence had received a warning about an attack, which hadn't been disclosed during the trial. Given that the trial wasn't fair, the court of appeal gave Samar and Jawad the right to appeal the sentence. But the last appeal also failed, and presently their lawyers are proposing to bring the case to the European court. But this will take at least two to three years.

Their lawyer Gareth Peirce comments: "Naturally, I'm worried that there is a real danger that they could spend the whole term of their sentence in jail."

Samar and Jawad follow the developments in their case from prison. Peirce describes this as another case of miscarriage of justice, saying "we don't have the ability to know what was hidden and we don't care to know. These matters will remain classified until the time comes when the governments decide that it is in their best interest to disclose them. But the situation is difficult and it is impossible to defend a case that involves political motives, regardless of what these are. In the absence of an unexpected, fundamental issue that cannot be ignored, I think that the result will remain the continuation of a new case of miscarriage of justice in Britain."

Translated by Lynn Maalouf

# A Journalist Diary: On the Horrors of War

## ■ Diana Mukalled

Television producer and presenter, Future TV

*While preparing the many episodes of her program "Through the Naked Eye" Diana Mukalled was able to visit several war-torn countries. In this diary she sheds light on the situation of women at times of war by presenting testimonies from four conflict areas in the Arab world namely Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait and Western Sahara.*

## Algerian Women: Suffering in Silence

Algerian women were the primary targets of the fundamentalist violence that flared up thirteen years ago in Algeria and is still taking place today. During the late eighties several Islamic fundamentalist groups mushroomed and adopted the name "Enforcement of Virtue

and Suppression of Vice" (al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahi'an al-munkar). Those groups were active in villages and popular areas where they inspected women and girls' mode of dress. Moreover, mosques served as the meeting place of the Islamist groups, where they delivered their speeches and *fatwas* (religious edicts).

Initially, the guerrilla warfare targeted security forces. Armed groups raped and killed the wives, daughters, and sisters of members of security forces (taghout). In addition, many women were abducted and kidnapped by Islamic militants; they were taken to the mountains where they were held as hostages in guerrilla camps. A lot of them were killed and their bodies left unattended. There are no official figures on the number of abducted women, yet it is estimated to be around several thousand.

The armed Islamist groups used to refer to *fatwas* (religious edicts) that allowed them to inflict violence on women of the Taghout (security forces). According to the guerrillas, given that the government persecuted and harassed their families who were incarcerated in detention camps, they had the right to do the same thing. "When penalized exact the same penalty on the perpetrator."

Talks are underway and civil consensus might end the crisis, yet, there is no doubt that Algerian women have been tragically ignored by their government and forgotten by the national and international media. Days, months, and years have passed and have managed to make them more introverted and lonely. Support for the victims on the part of the government, organizations, and even family and friends withers with the passage of time. Most victims still live in terror of the crisis that befell their families.

Targeting women is no coincidence. The Islamists emphasize in their discussions and *fatwas* the importance of persecuting women by raping and killing them. Women were the primary targets.

Below are three testimonies narrated by victims, including a child who managed to escape death after being hit with a hatchet on the head. Even though *fatwas* were issued prohibiting the target of children, fundamentalist violence had an effect on the lives of most Algerian citizens. The purpose of presenting these case studies is not only to uncover the grave human rights violations that have affected women. The aim is also to examine the victims' situations after time has passed.

### Malika

I hate the dark, it scares me ... Whenever I hear noises or shouting it all comes back to me. That night I felt like my heart was being ripped from my ribcage ... Two years have passed, my situation has improved, however, the death scenes that I saw will always stay with me ... There are no words to describe that night ... I really don't know how I have survived till today ... Yes, I am still afraid ... It's a fear that one can never get used to."

While recounting the incident Malika's face became cold and ... her voice was so neutral and her tone devoid of any emotion or expression to the extent that one could assume she was recounting events that someone else had experienced... Only the look on her face and her eyes staring at the horizon were evidence that she lived through a horrible tragedy. Malika managed to escape being killed in the massacre of Bentalha because of a fire that prevented the Islamists from getting to her. She was an onlooker to the killing of 200 members of her village including her mother and older sister.

Malika now lives with her father and younger siblings, who scatter around her while she hangs the worn out clothes she has washed. After the death of her mother



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

and elder sister she became responsible for her siblings, the eldest of whom is eleven years old. A terrified and troubled look has replaced the mischievous one normally detected on young peoples' faces and this is especially seen on the face of Ratiba, the youngest of the lot, who is now almost six years old.

One can hardly hear noises in the village of Bentalha, a deadly silence prevails that masks personal agony. Mud and dust is all one can see; the streets, houses, and even the clothes of the inhabitants fail to strike onlookers. The muddy, uneven, and narrow streets are filled with children playing to kill time. The inhabitants are poor and lead a dull, yet normal life. Bentalha, even though only twenty minutes away from the capital, seems like an ancient village. In it one of the worst massacres in the history of Algeria took place in 1997. The death toll in the villages of Bentalha, Rais and Al-Arba'e added up to approximately 1000 individuals, most of whom were slaughtered. Malika's younger siblings were spared because the assailants, in their haste to flee the area, didn't have time to kill them. They were thrown from the window of an apartment where they were hiding; they were on the second floor. They suffered broken bones but they survived.

" It was 11 p.m. when they came ... We were at home, we heard screams and loud noises in the background. Little by little the sounds got nearer ... We could not understand what they were saying ... I knew that the death that we had tried to flee when we left our village Blat was close ... we came to Bentalha, thinking that it was safer than Blat ... I realized how naive we were ... There was no time to think ... We dashed to our neighbor's house, terror got hold of us, and we scattered aimlessly ... I hid on the roof of a house and my younger siblings hid on its ground floor ... My mother and older sister fled to another neighbor's house. The attackers came from the fields nearby and entered our neighborhood ... I saw

them storm into houses and was about to faint when I heard them entering our house ... I heard the sounds of bloodshed ... sounds of throats being slit. I heard the slain gasp for their last breath ... I heard knives piercing chests, ... dying moans muffled, only the screams of the assailants were heard. I saw them enter the village from the hills nearby. They were wearing Afghani robes, most

of them had bushy disgusting beards with long hair, and some had long nails. They were armed with knives, axes, swords, and rifles.

"I heard them call people by their names and kill them; it was obvious that they were accompanied by people who knew the village well. I couldn't comprehend what was happening. I was shivering and felt I was going to die. I didn't see them slaughtering my mother and two sisters. After the armed men left my father told me what had happened. However, I saw them throw my siblings from the window. Moreover, while hiding on the roof I saw three of the armed men in front of me. I was so terrified I froze. I was unable to utter a word; my throat was so dry and hoarse. One of them looked at me and started waving his knife in my direction. A neighbor grabbed my hand and shoved me toward the rooftop; since the house was on fire they couldn't get to us.

"I screamed a lot but no one came to our rescue. What I saw grieved me a lot. Pools of blood, corpses, and children slaughtered, crying, wailing, and screaming... I felt very paralyzed; death was the only thing real in this surreal tragedy. I felt that God had deserted us, I felt so alone and sensed that no one gave a damn about what had befallen us.

"The murderers remained in the village for six hours. I heard them laughing and saw them enter into a shop to eat before they resumed their deadly mission. Ten minutes after their departure the police arrived ... I really do not know up until now why they didn't come earlier?

"The fields they crossed to get to us were totally destroyed ... but the houses they burned down and ruined were restored rapidly. There were many survivors, given that the village was inhabited by four thousand individuals ... who live in very gloomy, unattractive, and unsafe houses. Many houses had doors made of zinc, which explains the killers' easy access... The houses, shabby and faded, do not offer any security or protection for the inhabitants. Moreover, they lack the refined architectural style old Algerian houses are famous for. "

Malika, who is twenty years old, rarely leaves the house, especially when it's dark. She is in charge of the household and leads a very isolated life. The inhabitants of Bentalha are mostly unemployed, as is the case with very many Algerians. Since the massacre, her unemployed father roams the streets of the village aimlessly. The whole family lives off the 8000 Algerian dinars, equivalent to 100 US dollars, the government allotted to them in compensation to what has befallen them. The endless negotiations and talks aimed at reconciliation do not address the worries and future outlook of Malika. She

doesn't know the actual killers who massacred her loved ones. All she knows is that everyone is accountable. "I don't support anyone ... I don't know if the killers belong to the Islamist camp or are government people."

Malika's answers are unstructured and fragmented. She doubts everyone and everything: "The Government? Everyone doubts the government ... The army was there and so were members of the patriot guards: Why didn't they intervene to stop what was happening? As soon as the gunmen left they arrived. Why is that? Why didn't they come earlier? Nothing has ended and I really do not understand the highly publicized so called peace and reconciliation they are talking about. Massacres are still taking place. No one cares about us. All they care about is tranquility and peace in the cities and the capital. As far as the villages are concerned, no one cares what happens over there. We are the ones being killed and slaughtered. All I dream about is to be able to leave this country. I am so sick and tired of being afraid. I am still scared of the dark. So are my siblings and my father. There is no guarantee that the murderers will not come back. "

#### Nacira

Nacira's physical appearance and personality hardly resemble the picture one draws in one's mind. She is barely thirteen years old, fair in complexion with wide eyes. She has a friendly face and often smiles, but her smile rarely reaches her eyes. Her built is weak, her body frail, and her walk unsteady. One notices that she stumbles at times. When I met her she was wearing a red shirt that was too loose on her; it had to be for someone else. Her thick hair covers a head injury she sustained two years ago. With her hands Nacira parted her hair to reveal a very deep scar caused by an ax wound she received on her head when armed men attacked her parents' house in the village of Rais two years ago. Many people died during the attacks, including her mother and brother. Nacira got used to people's curiosity to see her scar. She does not hesitate to show her scar to anyone interested in inspecting it. Her hands move mechanically parting the hair to expose the scar. She recounts to the onlookers the details of the attack in a low, controlled, and expressionless voice. Her answers are short and to the point. Nacira describes the gunmen as "normal people like you and me ... with beards and long hair ... They use our dialect." She continues, "I don't remember much. I saw them kill my mother and younger brother. I was very scared. Upon seeing the armed man moving towards me with an ax in his hand I felt numb all over and fainted." Even though she fainted before she was attacked what she saw is enough to keep her awake at night, even two years later.

Life is ordinary and runs smoothly in Nacira's village; yet, it is not normal. After the incident, the inhabitants of Rais

lead an introverted and lonely life. After the death of her mother and since her father had to move to the city for work, Nacira was forced to move in with some relatives, since she could not live on her own. Her physical state prevents her from leading a normal life. When she leaves the house she has to be accompanied, since the head injury created a cavity to the skull. This renders any minor injury or accident life threatening.

#### Al-Zhra'

"I live with my two children in my house at the village. I'm a divorcee; my husband left me a long time ago and I know nothing about him. I work as a house-help to make ends meet and feed my family. I feel worthless and cheap after what happened to me. The whole village knows my story. Whenever they see me walking on the street they start talking about what happened to me: 'Look at her. Do you know what happened to her?' They gossip about me blatantly, indifferent to the fact that I can hear them."

"On that day - it was the summer of 1995 - I was home with my two children. My parents were not home. Three armed men broke into the house; the plan was to abduct me. They attacked me and started dragging me towards the door. I resisted. I didn't want to go with them. I knew what awaited me as I had heard many stories about abducted women who are taken to the mountains where they are raped and slaughtered. Many of our female neighbors were abducted and taken to the mountains where they were raped, killed, and thrown in valleys. One of the many women returned to the village after ten days in captivity but refused to say a word about what had happened to her.

"I cried and screamed, imagining what might become of me. I was terrified; my children started crying and clung to me. One of the armed men started hitting me with a razor blade while his accomplice moved towards me. They are monsters, for sure, not human. They had long beards, looked filthy, and had a horrible smell. I knew who they were; they used to live next to our house. Two years prior to my attack, they burned down our house and kicked us out of the village because my brothers were policemen. Given that our village was backed by the Islamists, the armed men got away with murder.

"One of them started telling me that the *Emir* (leader of

*I don't remember much. I saw them kill my mother and younger brother. I was very scared.*

*... while hiding on the roof I saw three of the armed men in front of me. I was so terrified I froze.*



the group) had ordered them to abduct me, so I had to go with them to the mountains. I sobbed and screamed, 'Why do you want to take me? What have I done in order to warrant such a punishment?' and they answered 'Your brothers are with the Taghout. That is why. You will come with us and we will release you only when they stop working with the government.' I struggled. The more I resisted the deeper the razor knife thrust against my flesh. One of them started undressing me and they raped me one after the other. I cried out, begging them to stop, but they were indifferent; they raped me in my father's house with my children and the entire village as their witnesses. The villagers did not dare interfere at first, but then some summoned up their courage and begged them not to take me with them. They complied and left me bleeding and traumatized with my shocked children surrounding me. I felt I was dying and prayed not to live another day. They violated me in front of the villagers and my children."

"After the incident I started visiting a psychiatric help center in my village. I go there twice a week, yet I still feel very insecure. I am barely surviving ... I have no life, no friends, and sometimes no food ... Our society is harsh, there is no compassion ... We Arabs are merciless. Even though people witnessed what happened to me they still consider me an outcast ... I was rejected by my own people even though I was not to blame ... The terror still persists ... They would be lying if they say it is over ... Wander around and you will see them ... Nothing changed for them ... We were the ones who were violated and no one really cares."

"I am lost; I no longer dream. All my earlier dreams vanished. Whenever I am reminded of the incident I wish I were dead."

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

## Kurdish Women in Iraq

When Kirkuk, the Iraqi city heavily populated with Kurds, fell last April after the defeat of Saddam Hussein's armed forces, thousands of Kurds returned to the city they were expelled from, the city they consider their capital. Among the endless queues of cars and pedestrians were several old military pickups with female peshmerga (Kurdish

fighters) in them. The women and girls whose ages ranged between 18 and 45 wore green uniforms and waved their arms in joy. They roamed around the city in their military pickups watching the return of the Kurds. Unlike Western women fighters, these women are not professional fighters, they comprise only a hundred persons and lack heavy weaponry.

Tinor, who is barely twenty-six years old, could not believe that she had returned to the city from which she and her family were expelled. They had suffered a lot at the hands of the Iraqi forces. The Iraqi soldiers forced her father to leave Kirkuk and imprisoned her uncle in 1995. That was their punishment for refusing to join the Baath party and renounce their Kurdish identity. Tinor asserts that the Kurds have endured the worst atrocities at the hands of Saddam's regime. Kurds were forced to renounce their Kurdish identity and adopt the Arab one: if they declined, displacement, imprisonment, or hanging was the punishment. The mass killings and forced displacement were the main reasons that Tinor joined the Kurdish women fighters who aimed to liberate the Kurdish people. Tinor enlisted in 1997, in the Kurdish city of Sulaimanyya in the self-rule area that was outside the control of the Iraqi regime. There, she received military training. She had no qualms about a US invasion and all she wanted was for the US to bring down the ruling Iraqi regime.

According to Lieutenant Sarwat Ismail, the supervisor who commands the women's brigade, "Most of the women and girl fighters have lost loved ones as a result of the regime's infamous massacres where thousands of Kurds were killed. The Kurds lived for the day the regime would fall, it's the only thought that kept them going and succeeded in lifting their spirits. We are very happy that the regime fell and we can now enjoy our freedom."

Although women increasingly join the peshmerga, that does not imply that Kurdish women are predominantly in it or that they are active participants in political debates or political life. Kurds belong to tribes that are conservative and traditional, and so it is hard for women to break away from the conservative chains imposed on them. Kurds have suffered grave human rights violations and endured internal displacement and massacres for decades. However, Kurdish women suffered more given that they sometimes suddenly found themselves heads of households responsible for the sustenance of their families.

Sadriat, who is in her late forties, survived Saddam Hussein's infamous 1988 Anfal campaign. His regime accused the Kurds of collaborating with Iran against Iraq, so he ordered his troops to demolish many Kurdish villages. Around 4,000 villages were erased and 200,000 Kurds killed. It is believed that many Kurds were trans-

ported to Iraq's southwestern desert where they were executed and buried in mass graves. Sadria lost her husband, brother, and his four children. After the massacre, she moved with what was left of her family to Shamshamal refugee camp in the Kurdish area, a short distance from where Iraqi soldiers were stationed. After the fall of the regime, the situation changed but Sadria and her family still live in the refugee camp awaiting financial help that will enable them to return to their village and rebuild their house.

Sadria cannot hold back her tears as she recalls the horrors of Anfal. She now lives with her elderly mother, who barely remembers her age. All she recalls with certainty is that she experienced the terror of World War II at a very young age. Over the years several wars took place, since there were so many she fails to remember them all.

"Since a very young age I've experienced nothing but the miseries of war ... All I know is wars ... wars, wars ... Who in God's name wants that? I want to live in peace. I literally have no one left. My son and his children were murdered ... What do you know about our suffering?" On this sad note the elderly lady ends her conversation and withdraws, refusing to say anything more; remembering is too painful.

Close to Erbil in northern Iraq one finds the refugee camp of Benswala where thousands of Kurdish refugees live. They were deported from Kirkuk and other areas under the Iraqi rule. Around a million Iraqi Kurds left their homes in 1991, a quarter of whom were subject to Saddam Hussein's policy of Kurdish annihilation. Practiced for decades in order to restore the imbalance in the population, Saddam Hussein allowed the Kurds the chance to stay only if they renounced their non-Arab heritage and registered themselves as Arabs. He also forced Kurds out of Kirkuk and brought in Arabs, mostly from the South, a policy most Kurds refer to as Saddam's version of ethnic cleansing. Most Arabs who moved there received free accommodation; they were offered the houses of the displaced Kurds to live in as a present from Saddam Hussein. "We were coerced to change our nationality ... to become Arabs if we wanted to stay."

Rahmeh, a Kurdish woman from Kirkuk, recounts that her family was expelled from their village after her brothers refused to join Al-Quds army, most of whose soldiers were Kurds who had been forced to join. She asserts: "We were visited by members of the Baath Party who urged my brothers to join their party or do their military service. After my brothers refused they threw us out of



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

Kirkuk. I am certain that our future will be better now that the reign of Saddam Hussein is over."

When people describe Iraqi Kurdistan, they admit that it is a big refugee camp, although the months that followed the fall of the regime have slightly improved the situation. Most inhabitants in the refugee camps are survivors of the many wars that befell the country. Today chaos prevails regarding the return of refugees who await financial help to be able to go back to their villages and rebuild their demolished houses. A lot of killings and confrontations were reported among Arabs, Turkumans, and Kurds as a result of the deportations and confiscation of houses that took place in the earlier period.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

## Kuwaiti Women and the Invasion of Kuwait in 1990

The end of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's reign coincided with the uncovering of painful and horrifying facts. The frequent discovery of mass graves in Iraq is one of the most painful daily occurrences. Whenever a new mass grave is discovered hundred of mothers and family members

rush in a desperate attempt to find out what had happened to their loved ones who had disappeared several years ago. Among the disappeared are six hundred Kuwaitis captured by the Iraqi army during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Among the Kuwaiti families awaiting news of their loved ones is Masha'el's family; they live for the day they find the body (corpse) of Badr, the eldest brother, captured by the Iraqi army during the Iraqi invasion.

While Masha'el recounts the details of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the abduction of her brother, one has a feeling that the events took place yesterday and not thir-

teen years ago. Masha'el narrates the story with emotion: "I was 18 years old, I had dreams, dreams that most girls of my age shared, namely graduating and securing a university degree, getting married, and starting a family of my own. I still remember the first few seconds that followed the Iraqi invasion. It was dawn ... I can still hear the deafening sounds emanating from the Iraqi Helicopters. It was shockingly unexpected."

Masha'el continues: "Badr was very disturbed and furious because of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The assault affected him tremendously to an extent that he lost his voice and was unable to speak on the first day of the occupation. He communicated with us by using sign language. The following day, on the 4th of August 1990, Badr left the house in the evening and never came back. His friends informed us that the Iraqi army captured him off the streets. We can never forget that day, the years are passing and the pain is still terrible."

Badr was taken into custody when he was barely 20 years old. His widowed mother and two sisters are still suffering as a result of his absence. His mother recounts while weeping: "Badr was very young when they arrested him. Being the 'man of the house' he used to take care of us. He was very kind and affectionate. Since they arrested him I have been living against my will. Living without him is very difficult."

Masha'el admits that due to Badr's absence she had to be in charge of the family. She asserts: "We are an Eastern conservative family and the presence of a man is highly needed in our society. The man whether a brother, father, or son is the head of the household and the provider. Hence, Badr's abduction robbed us of our provider and we are left alone, four women, to fend for our self with no man to protect us. I am now the head of the household and am responsible for all matters that are usually relegated to the men in the family. For instance, I take the car to the garage in case it breaks down. Moreover, I am expected to handle all transactions in ministries. This in our society is usually a man's job. You rarely find women in such places (garages, ministries, etc). We feel very alone, isolated and lifeless. We no longer mingle with people because we are unpleasant company. People get depressed when around us so we cut-off ourselves from people."

The Iraqi government took advantage of the long-standing territorial dispute with Kuwait to justify its invasion by claiming that Kuwait was a southern Iraqi province and was therefore rightfully Iraq's. Besides, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was nonchalant about openly declaring his ulterior motives namely possessing the material resources (fuel and money) that belonged to

Kuwait. According to Saddam Hussein, Iraq had defended all the Gulf region against the threat the Khomeini regime posed and so Kuwait had to contribute to the war expenses.

Despite the fact that during the Iran-Iraq conflict, Kuwait and most countries of the Gulf sided with Iraq, Saddam Hussein went ahead and invaded Kuwait. His actions shocked and angered the Kuwaitis a great deal. They regretted ever supporting Saddam Hussein ... Saddam's forces thus invaded Kuwait in August 1990 and declared it as its 19th province. Kuwait was under siege for a period of seven months after which the U.S.-led coalition launched operation "Desert Storm" thus forcing Saddam Hussein to retreat.

For seven months the Iraqi army imposed a brutal security regime on Kuwait ... theft, larceny, destruction, abduction, arrests, torture and killings are but a few of the many violations the Kuwaitis had to endure. Schools and governmental institutions were turned into detention centers ... The Iraqis systematically looted Kuwait and destroyed what they could not take with them. Government property ... oil fields were set on fire and Kuwait's days were turned into night.

Grave human rights violations were committed by the Iraqi troops. As a result of the Iraqi invasion, 500 Kuwaitis died after suffering the worst kinds of torture that included beatings, whipping, burns, acid baths, electric shocks, electric drills, amputating joints, cutting off ears and tongues, gouging of eyes, dismemberment and ax beatings, as well as extracting nails. Iraqi troops in their detention centers committed brutal acts of violence and left a large numbers of victims thus causing enormous human suffering to the Kuwaiti population.

Um Mansour, who currently lives in one of the suburbs of the Kuwaiti capital Kuwait city along with her youngest son, is another victim of war. She suffered greatly because of the Iraqi invasion. She lost her eldest son, Mansour, and was incarcerated along with her two remaining sons, Saleh and Mohammad during the invasion. She was held prisoner along with her youngest son, Mohammad, in the Iraqi detention centers found in the South of Iraq. They were freed during the Shiite uprising in 1991.

Mohammad, who was very young when his brother was captured and killed, recounts: My brother's body was found in a garbage dump next to our house in Kuwait. He was disfigured beyond recognition due to the torture by electric shocks he was subjected to. Moreover, his nails were extracted. While Mohammad was talking his mother was weeping and lamenting the loss of her sons. Since

the invasion she lost the ability to speak and so crying is her only means of expressing her grief. Mohammad continues: "My mother is still very affected by what has befallen us, our house is filled with pictures of my two brothers. My mother cries all day and thinks of nothing but her misfortune. She lost a son in a tragic way and knows nothing about her other son. We are re-living the tragedy each and every day."

### Rape

Among the many problems suffered by the Kuwaiti people as a result of the Iraqi invasion is the issue of rape and mass rape. A number of girls and women were subjected to sexual assault at the hands of the Iraqi soldiers. Eyewitness accounts arising

from the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait confirmed that the Iraqi regime committed grave sexual assault. Moreover, government officials also confirmed the existence of rape. In a conservative society like Kuwait talking about such matters is a taboo. Given that rape is a very sensitive subject to discuss, many families, whose women have been raped, cover up the matter and surround it with a veil of secrecy. It is practically impossible to find a rape victim willing to openly talk about what had happened to her. However, many Kuwaiti detainees testify that they witnessed women being raped by Iraqi soldiers.

It has been estimated that around 700 Kuwaiti girls and women were raped, by Iraqi soldiers, during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Rapes were either carried out in front of those women's parents or in Iraqi camps. Treating rape victims in Kuwait was handled very delicately, a lot of secrecy surrounds this issue till date. In order to conceal the identity of the victims no names were mentioned, victims were referred to by numbers. Because of the rape crisis, the grand Mufti of Al-Azhar issued a *fatwa* declaring abortion legal if performed on rape victims who got impregnated by Iraqi soldiers. However, the issue of raped women who got impregnated and gave birth is still an unresolved one in Kuwait. Moreover, it is important to note that those women are outcasts in their own society and are still struggling to be reintegrated into Kuwaiti society.

Adel Al-Mutairi, a university professor and Imam, is another victim of war. He was detained during the Iraqi invasion on pretext that he was a member of the Kuwaiti resistance. He was then sentenced to death and narrow-

*Several soldiers tore at her clothes wildly while the girl screamed hysterically till she fainted.*



ly escaped death one day before his execution after being freed thanks to the uprising in the South of Iraq. Adel admits that he endured brutalities and torture at the hands of the Iraqi soldiers. Yet, he asserts that what affected him the most was witnessing the rape of girls and women in front of their families. He recounts: "On the eighth day of the invasion the soldiers brought in the sister of one of the prisoners detained with us. Several soldiers tore at her clothes wildly while the girl screamed hysterically till she fainted. They assaulted her and gang raped her consecutively in front of us. After witnessing the rape of his sister, her brother lost his mind. God help him. I can still hear her cries and pleas; she suffered a lot." Adel asserts that as a result of the war, he witnessed horrifying rapes that he will never forget. He recounts that most rape victims were gravely assaulted and their screams and cries used to echo throughout the camp. Those women were seriously traumatized and they are currently undergoing treatment. Their progress, however, is very slow.

The Iraqi regime detained around 6000 hostages that included Kuwaiti men, women and children as well as foreign nationals. Sometimes entire families were captured randomly off the streets or were arrested for secretly engaging in resistance activities to counter the occupation ... Some hostages were freed and their return was facilitated by the red cross when the occupation ended. Moreover, a great number of detainees were liberated during the Shiite uprising that followed Kuwait's liberation and that take took place in the South of Iraq in 1991. Unlike the detainees held in the southern parts of Iraq, those jailed in Baghdad remained in prison. The fate of the 600 remaining prisoners is still unknown, yet, it is worth mentioning that following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime the bodies of around 8 Kuwaiti prisoners were found in mass graves in Iraq.

Among the 600 remaining detainees there are around 65 foreign nationals. Amongst them is a Lebanese woman, Daad Al-Hariri, born and raised in Kuwait, who was taken prisoner by Iraqi forces for being active in the Kuwaiti national resistance. Her remains were found thirteen years later, through DNA testing, in a mass grave in Al-Samawah area in Iraq in July 2003. Reports confirm that she was executed, along with several other prisoners of war, in 1991. Daad's family suffered a lot throughout those thirteen years. Her father's only wish was to see his daughter before he died. He passed away in 1998 without fulfilling his wish. Her mother spent the past thirteen years hoping she will see her daughter again. She now leads a lonely and miserable life.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

## Western Sahara: A Forgotten Crisis

The Western Sahara is one of the last unresolved issues in North Africa. Due to its location south of Morocco, east of Algeria and north of Mauritania it has been subject to incessant regional political interferences.

In 1975, Spain withdrew from the area after having occupied it for over ninety years. Spain had barely left when Moroccan forces entered and took control over the Sahara, claiming a historical right of sovereignty over this land. And since then, an armed conflict has pitted the Sahrawis, who demand independence, against Morocco, which wants to extend its sovereignty over the region. Various other parties and states have also become players in the conflict. In 1991, a ceasefire was announced in accordance to a UN-sponsored peace plan and, to this day, the international body is still trying to work out a peace settlement.

In the depths of the Saharan desert lies a tiny, desolate republic called the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which was called as such by the Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el-Hamra y Rio de Oro, better known as the Polisario Front. This republic stretches along the borders with Morocco, and the Front has been locked in a bitter conflict with the Moroccan forces, in what has become the longest conflict in North Africa. There are two main groups: one lives in the Saharan region controlled by Morocco since 1975, while the largest part lives as migrants in border camps near Tinduf, south of Algeria, while still and others are in Northern Mauritania.

The Tinduf camps enjoy a semblance of self-rule, as the Polisario has controlled the region since it was officially established in 1973, decades after fighting the Spanish colonialists and later the Moroccan forces. There, in the depths of the desert, clusters of homes are spread out on a piece of land that has no strategic importance, except for that long-forgotten conflict.

The mud houses and tents barely provide any protection to the 150,000 Sahrawis living there. Drinking water is scarce and the living conditions are bad, while the camps have managed to survive thanks to the scanty help they obtain.

In this inhospitable environment, Sahrawi women walk in the streets in colored dresses, grabbing the attention



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

of outsiders and bringing warmth into the mud houses and alleys. With their rich variety of bright colors, they create a sense of vitality amidst the lusterless sand. The role they play in the camps is easy to note, as they are the ones who almost entirely organize life in the camps, given that most men live there only intermittently, when they return from their army service. The majority of men are almost always absent. And those men who are not in the army wander into the Sahara for several months to herd the cattle. So the women are generally left alone to care for the family and manage the camps.

This reality has imposed certain roles on women, who hold positions in the Polisario Front committees and councils as well as in administration and education. They are also in charge of the family and their households. Most often, the Sahrawi women are bold, and give the impression that they run the desert camps. Despite the harsh living conditions, the Sahrawi

refugees try to hold on to their traditions. Marriage for instance is greatly encouraged by the Sahrawis and the Polisario itself, as the Front organizes the wedding ceremonies and offers a place of residence to newly-weds, which is in fact a mud house. It also pays for the weddings of those couples wishing to raise new generations of "revolutionaries"!

Sayla is a young Sahrawi woman, besides her household responsibilities, she is pursuing her education. Like so many Sahrawi women, she has gone through military training in camps especially set up for women in the depths of the desert. According to Sayla: "I like to learn and work, and whatever a man does, a woman can do as well. In the summer, the students return from the cities where they are learning and us women, we hold military training sessions to learn how to carry weapons and fight. We are still calling for our independence, and despite the fact that there have been no armed clashes

for a while, we need to be always prepared and cannot relinquish our dream of having our own independent state one day.”

Sayla's mother, Om Said, lives without her husband and sons, who have reached the stage of university education. The men in her family go into the Sahara for several months in a row. It is worthy noting that there is a real effort to achieve high educational standards, despite the harsh conditions. When the refugee centers were initially formed in Tinduf, the level of education was extremely low and illiteracy was widespread. But today, these camps boast one of the most successful educational systems in the African continent.

The rate of illiteracy has dropped to five percent. Moreover, to eradicate illiteracy, schools and centers have been established throughout the camps. A Polisario committee sends students of both genders to pursue their studies abroad. As a result of the long Spanish colonization, most Sahrawis are fluent in Spanish, which is their second language in school after Arabic. Very often, Spanish non-governmental organizations go to the camps and offer aid to the Sahrawis. Some organizations even sponsor organized summer camps for Sahrawi children in Spain or elsewhere in Europe. Cuba also offers aid to the Sahrawis, as many young Sahrawis have been to Cuba for training and educational trips.

Alia, a young Sahrawi woman in her early 30s, studied medicine in Cuba for twelve years. She returned to practice in the Sahara, despite the harsh conditions and scarcity of medical resources. “The medical equipment here is very rare. I brought this stethoscope with me from Cuba, for example. We practice in very difficult conditions. Look at the sphygmomanometer for instance; I also brought it with me

from Cuba. There is little we can get here as far as medical equipment and gear.” As she talked, Alia diagnosed a child at the hospital, which is really a set of rooms made of compacted mud and whose beds are no more than shabby mattresses laid out on the floor. “What the children suffer from most is malnutrition,” Alia says, as she looks sadly at a child who's barely three years old and is stretched out on the floor, as his mother gets his medication.

Nutrition is a great problem for the camps' residents; their food resources are very limited and often their scarce produce is mixed with the sand that blows at any time and stops at nothing. Sometimes even, that is all the Sahrawis can eat.

Even though the clashes have ceased, the Sahrawis still live with the belief that one day, war could resume and they could be displaced once again. After running away from Ayoon in 1975 when the Moroccan army went into the Sahara, Aziza lives with her family, her only certainty being that the future is unknown. “This life we live was forced upon us by war, and we have been here ever since our nation was divided among three states, Morocco, Mauritania, and Spain. We refuse to live as anything but free. We were forced to seek refuge in Algeria, which gave us this region. We have been forced to live in this harsh nature, amidst the sweltering heat and sand storms, with no clear future for either us or our children.”

As she stood before the mud house where she and her family live, the sky suddenly started to change and turned into a sandy, dusky color, erasing the line between the desert's sand the approaching sandstorm. In these weather conditions, there is no real refuge for the hundreds of families, for whom sand has become an integral part of their water, air, and food. Aziza, who is a fifty-year-old, compact woman, smiles when describing how she lives during these storms: “When the wind gets strong, it can destroy some of the houses, and we remain in our tent until it falls, and then, we wait for the storm to settle, and we start sowing and building a tent all over again. Such is our life, and this has become a natural reality to us.” Safia, Aziza's eldest daughter, has become used to life's harshness in the camps, and considers her life normal and, mostly, better than if she had to live in a region merged to Morocco, even if this would bring more comfort than the sad life in the camp.

The Sahrawi families live on the aid the Front regularly offers to all the refugees, which includes food, tents and clothing, but not money. The United Nations, certain governments, and non-governmental organizations also help.

While Aziza struggles to set up a new tent every time the sand blows away her family's tent, there are hundreds like her who wait for their fate to be determined; but so far, their hopes have regularly vanished into thin air and all that is left for Aziza is to wait, as waiting seems to be the only choice she has left.

Translated by Lynn Maalouf

## Vermeer in Baghdad

From a *New York Times*  
photo, July 16, 2003

Antonia Matthew



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

Light comes through the closed window,  
harsh desert light,  
the small panes making patterns  
on the bare whitewashed wall  
behind a seated figure.

Desert light, not cool, luminous, North European light  
which caught the yellow and blue dress of  
Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window  
as she held it in both her hands, absorbed;

or that which fell from a high window  
on Woman with a Pearl Necklace  
as she lifted the strand, looked  
in the large mirror, smiling, pleased;

or, as wintry light illuminated the broad  
forehead of the Milkmaid, who poured  
with such attention a thin stream of milk  
into an earthenware bowl.

This desert light is closest  
to that in *A Girl Asleep*.  
In her shiny, pleated, red dress  
she rested her head on her hand,  
elbow on a cluttered table;  
the light from a half-closed door  
just catching her face.

But *The Woman Sitting in a Chair*  
wears black. Only her face, with dark  
eyebrows, and her large strong hands,  
a silver ring on one finger, are uncovered;  
one hand is over her mouth  
her eyes closed.

We know her story.  
She is not sleeping.

Zakiya Abd, sitting alone  
in this bare sunlit corner, is mother of Beyda  
who has disappeared.

What does Zakiya see  
behind those closed eyes?  
She says, “Whether she's alive or dead,  
I just want to find her.”  
What words would pour out  
if she hadn't pressed a hand across her mouth?