

Detained and Abused for Delivering Aid in Syria

Author: [Faten Samih Abu Fares](#)

After entrapment and interrogation, a series of prisons and finally a miraculous release.

Carrying money through the Mleha checkpoint was almost impossible, but I had 1,000 US dollars in aid money that I needed to deliver to the head of the Humanitarian Aid Bureau in Harasta, a town in rebel-held Eastern Ghouta.

I'd been given the money by a civilian aid organisation called Najda Now, and since I was finding it impossible to deliver the funds, I sought help from a man called Abu Fahd whom I'd met recently.

Late in the afternoon on July 27, 2013, my phone rang. It was Abu Fahd asking me to bring the money and to meet him in half an hour at a location close to my home in al-Maisat.

I shut my laptop, slipped on my trainers, and rushed out of my house dressed in the old shirt and trousers I wear at home, leaving behind my 17-year-old daughter who was studying for her baccalaureate exam in mathematics.

I arrived at the meeting place at 5pm to find the street deserted except for four people – one talking on his mobile phone, another standing next to a black car, and Abu Fahd, who was with another man.

Abu Fahd's altered appearance caught my attention. His hair and clothes were no longer shabby, and he looked elegant and clean.

"I'd like to introduce you to [my] uncle," he said, indicating the other man, who was wearing sunglasses and seemed to be in his mid-thirties.

I turned to his "uncle" and said, "I have 1,000 dollars I'd like to deliver to Ghouta to be used for humanitarian purposes."

My world suddenly turned upside down. The men on the street attacked me and pushed me into the car. One of them took his shirt off and put it over my head as the car drove off. I could still see a little through the light fabric of the shirt, and I realised we were driving towards Information Intelligence headquarters in Abbasiyin Square.

Once we arrived there, I was led into a courtyard where I was blindfolded and slapped repeatedly on my head and back. The courtyard was full of the sounds of weapons and ammunition being moved about.

I felt lost standing there, but I tried to pull myself together. This was the third time I'd been arrested, and I knew exactly what was coming.

I was led to a room where a man, perhaps an officer or interrogator, showered me with insults.

"Are you trying to be Mother Teresa, you...?" he said.

It was terrible. Someone kept on hitting me on the head, and I could hear an electric cable swishing close to my ear, then being pulled away again.

Later, I was led to another room where – much to my surprise – the man who questioned me was kind and sympathetic. He asked me a few personal questions, typing my answers into a computer. At sunset, when the call for prayer sounded, he brought me a chickpea and tomato sandwich, saying, "You must eat because soon you'll be taken somewhere else where you won't be given food for a while."

I was taken away by two rough men who threw me inside a car. Once again, they blindfolded me and grossly insulted me.

When we arrived at our destination, they removed the blindfold and forced me to sit on the same spot on the floor for two hours. They wrote down information about me and took my handbag. When I asked them about the 1,000 dollars, they said that they weren't thieves and that they'd return the money to me when I left.

Soon afterwards, a woman came to search me. She told me she too was a detainee and that we at Air Force Intelligence headquarters near Mazzeh airport. I was so shocked that I almost fainted [Air Force Intelligence has a particular reputation for brutality]. She tried to console me by saying we were in the "missions" division, where the treatment was better than in the interrogation unit.

I was taken to a small dormitory that looked like a prefabricated house. Although it was very small, it was crammed full, with about 30 women lying on the floor.

Oddly, none of them was a revolutionary activist, apart from one, my friend Ruwaida Kanaan, whom we'd been searching for.

During my imprisonment there, the number of detainees increased markedly. We were joined by women of all ages, even teenagers, who swore that they had done nothing wrong. They had been arrested at various locations, but mostly at the Mleha checkpoint by a female officer they named as Rana, who also confiscated their money and jewellery. It seemed that women from Eastern Ghouta and Qabun were being specifically targeted.

It later transpired that these women had been arrested randomly, just so that they could be released during Eid ul-Fitr, the holiday at the end of Ramadan, and the regime could then claim it had granted an amnesty.

As for me, I was interrogated three times, twice by considerate interrogators and once by a Major Suhail, who hurled vicious insults at me.

Fourteen days later, I was summoned from my cell and given my handbag bag. When I asked about the 1,000 dollars, I was told the money would be returned to me in court.

I was elated that I was being taken to court, but my hopes were quickly destroyed when we arrived at Military Police headquarters, from where I was sent on to Rukneddin police station. I remained there for three days until I was moved to the Kfarsousa police station, where I was held along with Maissa Saleh, a reporter for Orient TV who was under arrest.

Kfarsousa was hell. The two officers guarding our detention cell were extremely debased, and I suffered there more than I did throughout the rest of my ordeal.

The humiliation began when we were searched. A girl from another Arab country who had worked as an escort in a nightclub searched me. Her residence permit had expired and she was awaiting deportation. She was extremely rude, and told me in harsh terms to take all my clothes off. She was young enough to be my daughter, yet she was looking at my naked body and searching me in the most degrading manner. I was so embarrassed that I cried that day and many other days when I recalled the incident.

After nearly two weeks, we were all handcuffed and taken to the central Adra prison. Dozens of us were herded onto a large truck like sheep. Actually, no – we were sheep. It was a long journey to the prison, as we had to avoid the main highway due to fighting between the Free Syrian Army and government forces.

Once at the prison, we were placed in cells and the cycle resumed. In Adra, I found that money was central to life. Women who had money could buy all they needed, and you could sense big class differences among the prisoners.

I had nothing, and I felt nothing but sorrow.

At visiting times, I stood by the door hoping my name would be called out. I was sure that the treacherous roads would prevent anyone from visiting me, but still I hoped.

Finally, I heard my name one day. A lawyer appointed by my brother-in-law had come to see me.

A few days later, I was called out together with a few other women, and we were told that we were being taken to the Counter-Terrorism Court. Once there we were placed in a tiny room below a staircase, and we were brought out to stand before the judge, two at a time.

When my turn came, I looked round and saw my brother-in-law and my lawyer in court, and I felt safe.

The judge was very kind, and I can still remember the exact words he spoke to me, "I'm thinking of not releasing you, because when they arrest you for a fourth time, you will never see the light of day again."

He advised me to stop what I was doing, and then ordered my release. I asked him about the 1,000 dollars, and he said the only thing the court had received was my file.

I and the other detainees were taken back to Adra prison, where we were given our belongings and we went our separate ways.

It did cross my mind to go to Air Force Intelligence headquarters and ask about the money, but I quickly dismissed that idea. I was willing to give up a million dollars to get out of this mess.

I returned to Eastern Ghouta and swore I'd never leave it until God took my soul. I would rather be killed by a shell than arrested a fourth time.

Faten Samih Abu Fares is the pseudonym of a Damascus Bureau contributor living in Eastern Ghouta, Syria.

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