

Fleeing the Islamic State

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Students are left with no choice but to escape when the militants arrive.

The night the Islamic State (IS) decided to invade the city of Hassakah to “cleanse it of infidels” had started out like any other.

My flatmates and I had dinner at our usual restaurant in the city centre, then went back home. Each one of us came from a different city so we had rented a flat together until the end of our university exams.

We were still awake a little after midnight on June 14, 2014, when we heard a large explosion. We rushed out to find out what had happened. Our street was suddenly alive with people, but nobody had any information on the source of the blast.

I went back inside, terrified that another explosion would follow. I thought of my father; he had tried his best to persuade me not to travel to Hassakah, but I had ignored his appeals because I wanted to complete my studies.

I walked into my room and found my friend Baraa throwing her clothes into her suitcase.

“Are you mad? What are you doing?” I asked her. “Where would you go at this hour?”

Baraa burst into tears.

“You’re the mad one if you stay here,” she wept. “They will slaughter half the youths of the city, and if they catch me I will be enslaved for being Christian.”

I didn’t know how to calm my friend down. I myself was panicking and needed someone to comfort me.

Both of us flinched when we heard a loud knock on our door, but I plucked up my courage and went to open it.

It was my classmate Saeed, who rushed in and slammed the door behind him.

“IS have stormed the city,” he exclaimed. “They blew up that restaurant you usually have dinner in, and they are trying to get to the main square.

“They’ll be here soon. Our worst fears have come true,” he continued.

My flatmates began bombarding him with questions, but he had no answers or ideas of what to do next.

We sat there discussing our options. By three in the morning, we had formulated a plan.

Saeed would go and gather our male friends and come back at six o’clock. We would then leave the city together and travel to Raqqa. That had also fallen under IS control, so we would stay in two separate farmhouses on the outskirts, one for the men and one for the women.

We believed it would be better to go there than stay in Hassakah waiting for the unknown. We would think of our next step once we were safe.

The girls and I spent the next few hours gathering our belongings. When we were finished, the flat seemed as if we had never lived there.

Six o’clock came and went, but Saeed didn’t come for us. We could hear movement outside on the street – it seemed that most of our neighbours had decided to flee too.

Unable to leave the house without the protection of our male friends, we felt powerless and alone.

As we sat there anxiously waiting I thought of my family; my parents would die of grief if something happened to me.

I wondered if I would ever set foot in my family home again. I had hated living there because it was so far away from my university, but now I longed for its familiarity and comfort.

Our flatmate Sarab suddenly stood up.

“I’m going out to find a car so we can leave,” she said, walking out before we could stop her.

Around 30 minutes later, someone knocked at our door. We opened it and found two men carrying Sarab, who was unconscious.

One of the men was a taxi driver. He told us what had happened.

“Your friend was walking in the middle of the street when an exchange of fire erupted around her. She’s lucky she wasn’t shot.

“She ran towards my taxi and got in. She barely had time to give me directions to your flat before she passed out,” he continued.

Sarab was pale and felt cold. None of us knew what to do so we sought the help of our neighbour who was a doctor. She told us that Sarab had suffered a panic attack, and quickly brought her round.

Three hours later, my flatmates and I finally managed to contact Saeed. He had hired a minibus to take us to Raqqa along with his friends.

The driver came to collect us soon after, but we were delayed for a further hour while we haggled with him over the inflated fee he demanded.

When we finally began our journey, the driver wound his way through a maze of small streets, avoiding all the city’s main roads.

My friends and I sat in silence, barely daring to breath. We were all petrified.

Would we make it? Or would we die?

If we died, how would that happen?

The driver suddenly broke the silence.

“Congratulations. You are all very lucky. We are now outside Hassakah and on our way to Raqqa,” he said.

We still had a long way to go, so he decided to stop for a short rest. He pulled over on the side of the road and stepped out of the vehicle to stretch his legs. Saeed and his friends joined him.

Moments later, we saw a truck speeding in our direction. The vehicle stopped and two armed men disembarked.

“IS militants!” one of the girls whispered.

I quickly pulled up the brown scarf I had around my neck and covered my head, praying I wouldn’t be killed for not wearing a proper hijab.

The militants approached the group of men and began talking to them.

We were amazed when a few minutes later they smiled and went back to their vehicle.

The driver and our friends got back into the bus. I could tell that one of them was suppressing the urge to laugh.

“What happened?” I asked him. “How come we’re still alive?”

At that he burst out laughing.

“We’re alive because those militants are from Chechnya! They couldn’t understand what we were saying, and therefore they couldn’t question us about Islam. They simply couldn’t find a reason to kill us,” he said.

“It’s ironic,” he added bitterly, “The government didn’t kill us, and the fighters who claim to be devout Muslims are shedding our blood.”

We continued our journey to Raqqa feeling a little safer. We knew that any IS militants we might run into would most probably be foreigners who did not speak Arabic, and knew nothing about the religion they were supposedly fighting for. We had a chance of talking our way out of danger.

Mona al-Mohammad is the pseudonym of a Damascus Bureau contributor from Tabaqa. The 20-year-old was forced to abandon her Arabic literature university course and flee to Idlib’s countryside where she and her family are now displaced.

This story was produced by **Syria Stories** (previously Damascus Bureau), IWPR’s news platform for Syrian journalists.

Location: [Syria](#)

Topic: Women

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/fleeing-islamic-state>