

Syria: The Dressmaker's Daughter

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A young woman's outspoken courage costs her her life.

A few blocks away from my house in Aleppo's northern suburbs, there lived a seamstress and her daughter Hasnaa.

Hasnaa was a beautiful 21-year-old brunette, with hazel eyes that sparkled with intelligence.

Often, when I went to visit her mother for a dress fitting, I would run in to Hasnaa. She had a strong personality, and I enjoyed the conversations we had. Sometimes I would jokingly call her Zenobia, as her beauty and wit combined reminded me of the famous queen of Palmyra.

During the early days of the revolution, any social gathering of women would involve discussing current events in Syria. This happened many times when I visited my seamstress. Naturally, some of us were against the government while others supported it.

The latter group would spark an anger in Hasnaa I had never seen before.

"It's a cruel and murderous dictatorship," she would tell them.

Her bold attitude made me proud, but her outspoken views made other women uncomfortable. "Shabiha" [pro-government paramilitaries] and informers had infiltrated Aleppo, and if they heard about these conversations, the consequences would be dire. "You're headstrong - be careful where your words might lead you," they would advise her.

One day in early March 2013, I ran into Hasnaa on our street corner. I was on my way to the market with my son, and she was on her way to university. We ended up sharing a minibus with a few other passengers - two young men, two elderly men, and an elderly woman with her grandson.

As we approached al-Kindi hospital, we were stopped at a government checkpoint. A soldier asked for our IDs and after looking at them, ordered one of the elderly men step out.

"Why? I haven't done anything," the man said, fear in his voice.

Another soldier laughed and replied, "You're from Marea. Get out!"

The frail man stepped out of the minibus. It was obvious from the way he walked that he was sick, but the soldiers didn't care. The only thing that mattered to them was where he came from, Marea, one of the first northern towns to side with the revolution.

We all watched in silence - all of us, that is, except Hasnaa.

"Leave the poor man alone!" she shouted. "Don't any of you fear God, you tyrants?"

A large bearded soldier appeared out of nowhere and pulled Hasnaa out of the bus saying, "Come along with him and learn what the true meaning of tyranny is."

"May God curse you!" she screamed as he dragged her off.

As our minibus sped off, I watched through tears as Hasnaa was kicked and beaten by the soldiers. They were merciless. She was guilty of speaking the truth.

Later that day, when I came back home, I saw Hasnaa's mother standing at her door. She was speaking to one of the young men who had been in the minibus. He had done what I lacked the courage to do, and told Hasnaa's family what had happened.

Hasnaa was gone from home for three months, during which her family searched for her in various security headquarters.

When she finally came home, freed from the injustice of the government, she fell prey to a different kind of injustice, gossip.

Stories circulated through the neighbourhood as people imagined what might or might not have happened to her in detention.

A few days later, I heard a call from our local mosque. It was a death announcement. It was Hasnaa's death announcement.

Some people say she suffered a heart attack because of the unjust treatment she was exposed to. Some say she committed suicide. Others again say she was killed by her brother.

Personally, I can't help but wonder who it was exactly who killed Hasnaa. Government tyrants? Or a society prejudiced against women, where chivalry no longer exists?

May your soul rest in peace, Hasnaa, you will forever remain a symbol of the revolution, whose flame will burn eternally.

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

Location: Syria

Topic: Detentions

Conflict

Women

Focus: Speaking Out: Women's Voices from Syria

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/syria-dressmakers-daughter>