

In Syria, a Mother's Sorrow and Pain

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"Heroism will not die with the death of my sons."

Khaldiya Diyab devotes Thursday mornings to visiting four of her sons. She steps out of her house dressed in black, holding a bunch of flowers she will take to them.

The four sons lie in a cemetery, casualties of Syria's unending war.

Khaldiya, 55, comes from a village near Idlib, and she has raised six boys and three girls while also working as a farmhand to support her husband.

Zeydan Musa, her husband, is now 65 and retired. He used to be a government official and spent 30 years stationed in Daraa, where the family lived.

"Although my husband worked for the government, he hated what it did," said Khaldiya. "It allowed security officers of the lowest ranks to humiliate people. It was tyranny at its best."

Khaldiya hated the regime herself, and her children shared this hatred. Despite this, her sons joined the government army as a way of earning a living.

The start of the revolution in 2011 marked a turning point in their lives.

"The government unleashed its anger on innocent civilians, so my sons decided to engage in the revolution," Khaldiya said. "They didn't defect, but instead helped the opposition by feeding it information such as the whereabouts of detainees."

Eventually, her sons become more active in fighting back.

"When they witnessed the severe torture and rape to which prisoners were being subjected, they started planting explosives in officers' vehicles," Khaldiya said.

They paid a high price. The eldest son, Khayro, was discovered and arrested. He died under torture, leaving three young children behind.

Samer, Mohammad, and Safwan worked as security service officers, and after they were placed under surveillance, they too were arrested and tortured. Their response was to defect to the Free Syrian Army.

"They began to fight the regime openly, planting and detonating explosives at military and security checkpoints," Khaldiya recalled. "I lost Samer and Safwan in the battle for Busra al-Harir a little over two years ago. Mohammad was martyred in Idlib after carrying out seven operations against Syrian and Iranian soldiers."

A fifth son, Hasan, was captured and imprisoned by government forces, and his fate remains unknown.

"The only son I have left is Ahmad," Khaldiya said, falling silent for a moment before adding, "Thank God for everything."

Her husband Zeydan has been deeply scarred by the loss of his sons.

"My wife and I have lost far more than many others have," he said. "We have lost our children, and I feel nothing but despair. Khaldiya offers me hope and comfort, but she needs someone to comfort her."

One of their daughters, 35-year-old Asriya, tries to provide this comfort.

"God help my parents. They are in constant pain but try to hide it," she said. "When I try to comfort my mother, she tells me life must go on, and we mustn't spend it dwelling on the disasters that have befallen us and the loved ones we have lost."

Asriya's own life has also been affected by the war. Her 40-year-old husband Salem was injured in a government airstrike and is now disabled. She and her daughters now provide for the family by working at a fruit-processing factory.

"This war has left no one unharmed," she said.

Umm Ahmad, a 60-year old relative of Khaldiya, joined us, and recalled a conversation they once had.

“I was blaming her for encouraging her children to join the revolution, because that’s what caused their deaths,” she said. Khaldiya’s response left her dumbstruck – “Can you guarantee that the regime won’t drop a barrel bomb on your house or any other house in the village, killing everyone inside? Hasn’t it killed innocent people in their homes and in the prisons? I am not sorry I lost my children. They are martyrs. They did not die in vain.”

Umm Ahmad added, “Khaldiya is a courageous, patient and wise women”.

Khaldiya’s face reflected a profound sadness. She spoke of how her heart was broken and she felt nothing but sorrow and pain.

But then she added, “Heroism will not die with the death of my sons. Syria gives birth to heroes every minute. And God willing, it is these heroes who will finish the work of my sons, and liberate the country from tyranny.”

Hadia Mansour is the pseudonym of a Damascus Bureau contributor living in Idlib, Syria.

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