Syria: Searching For My Lost Father

Author: Haya Mohammed

In Raqqa, a mother pleads with Islamic State’s potentates for news of her abducted husband.

My mother refused to surrender to the fact of my father’s disappearance. She refused to submit, tightened her grip on her wounded heart and put all her efforts into trying to bring back the man who was her life companion, her soulmate.

Whenever we’d talk to her over the internet from our home in another province, she would tell us how many doors she’d knocked on that day in search of help, how many people she’d begged for the most tenuous bit of information that might lead her to her kidnapped husband, and how many tribal leaders she’d shed tears in front of.

Just hearing about what she had been through was painful and heart-wrenching. Thinking of your incredible, respectable mother, who was revered by all during the first two years of the revolution, being exposed to such enormous humiliation makes you want to die.

We were far away, the horror tearing at our souls. But finally we were able to return to Raqqa. The next day, my mother had an appointment to see one of the tribal sheikhs to repeat the same supplications she had made to many others before. I asked whether I could accompany her to his home because I didn’t trust any of those sheikhs, but she adamantly refused.

“No, by God no,” she said. “I won’t let them so much as lay eyes on you. I won’t throw you into that zoo. These are base, foul people. I won’t allow it.”

She was terrified that we might come to their attention and be stolen from her, especially after hearing repeated rumours that when Islamic State first took over the city, the mujahedin would forcibly marry any girl who took their fancy regardless of her family’s wishes.

After I insisted, my mother relented, but on one condition – that I never lift my niqab in their presence. I put on the full sharia-compliant outfit, the full “cloak and veil”, both abaya and niqab. It was the first time I had wandered through Raqqa since “the foreigners” had seized control. I was so afraid that I grabbed my mother’s hand.

We arrived at the home of the grand, esteemed sheikh. We knocked and a middle-aged woman answered the door. My mother introduced herself and asked to see the sheikh, and after waiting a few minutes, the great man himself came to see us. He was dressed in traditional Arab costume, his beard long and black, wearing a red headress.

“Welcome, sister,” he said. “How may I help you?”

My mother made her usual plea, accompanied by honest tears, “In God’s name and in yours, dear sheikh, I beg your help; we have no one beside you to help us save God.”

I couldn’t bear to hear this and let out a gasp, shedding tears that were concealed by the niqab. I felt like I had been punched repeatedly. At that moment I wanted nothing more than to grab my mother’s hand and pull her away from that filthy place, but I controlled myself for the sake of my father, who deserved everything we could do, and more.

“My daughters and I have no breadwinner but my husband,” my mother continued. “Is it permissible that women are left without support? My husband has been missing for four months and he is innocent. Ask around Raqqa about him; everyone will tell you how good and decent he is.”

I couldn’t bear her entreaties; I pulled at my abaya to relieve my tension. My tear-filled eyes watched the sheikh, but I really wanted to deal him the same punches I had felt before, only for real.

“Who is your husband, sister?” he asked.

When she told him his name, he replied, “For the love of God, sister, I know him and I know of his goodness. He doesn’t deserve this. Even my brother asked me to inquire about him. Don’t worry, we’ll solve it, there’s no proof of any charge against him.”

My eyes sparkled with joy. He had as good as admitted that my father was alive and in an Islamic State prison. But this did not reduce my pain and resentment.

My mother began with a few words of veneration and praise, in the hope that this man wouldn’t turn out to
be a hypocrite and liar like all the rest of the sheikhs.

“May God preserve you, sheikh,” she said. “May God help you and hear you always.”

My mother and I picked up our wounded selves and left the house. The whole way back, I thought about how they’d kidnapped my father and humiliated us. We who had been in the vanguard of the revolution – how could they? We who had protested alongside the young people in the streets, turning to face the regime’s bullets. We who had rushed through city squares to flee from the regime’s security patrols. They had been no more than hypocrites, two-bit informants writing reports for that same regime.

It’s been a whole year since that happened. It wasn’t the last, either. It was repeated again and again after that, with different sheikhs in different houses.

But my mother has never lost hope despite all their lies and their duplicity. She is in no doubt that we must sacrifice everything and do all that lies in our power for him, our hero, and that his return will be a balm for all wounds.

It’s been a year since happened. A year, with my father still rotting in a dark dungeon somewhere.

Haya Mohammed is the pseudonym of a student from Raqqa who was living in Aleppo, and is now in Turkey.

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