

A Journalist Diary: On the Horrors of War

■ Diana Mukalled

Television producer and presenter, Future TV

While preparing the many episodes of her program "Through the Naked Eye" Diana Mukalled was able to visit several war-torn countries. In this diary she sheds light on the situation of women at times of war by presenting testimonies from four conflict areas in the Arab world namely Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait and Western Sahara.

Algerian Women: Suffering in Silence

Algerian women were the primary targets of the fundamentalist violence that flared up thirteen years ago in Algeria and is still taking place today. During the late eighties several Islamic fundamentalist groups mushroomed and adopted the name "Enforcement of Virtue

and Suppression of Vice" (al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahi'an al-munkar). Those groups were active in villages and popular areas where they inspected women and girls' mode of dress. Moreover, mosques served as the meeting place of the Islamist groups, where they delivered their speeches and *fatwas* (religious edicts).

Initially, the guerrilla warfare targeted security forces. Armed groups raped and killed the wives, daughters, and sisters of members of security forces (taghout). In addition, many women were abducted and kidnapped by Islamic militants; they were taken to the mountains where they were held as hostages in guerrilla camps. A lot of them were killed and their bodies left unattended. There are no official figures on the number of abducted women, yet it is estimated to be around several thousand.

The armed Islamist groups used to refer to *fatwas* (religious edicts) that allowed them to inflict violence on women of the Taghout (security forces). According to the guerrillas, given that the government persecuted and harassed their families who were incarcerated in detention camps, they had the right to do the same thing. "When penalized exact the same penalty on the perpetrator."

Talks are underway and civil consensus might end the crisis, yet, there is no doubt that Algerian women have been tragically ignored by their government and forgotten by the national and international media. Days, months, and years have passed and have managed to make them more introverted and lonely. Support for the victims on the part of the government, organizations, and even family and friends withers with the passage of time. Most victims still live in terror of the crisis that befell their families.

Targeting women is no coincidence. The Islamists emphasize in their discussions and fatwas the importance of persecuting women by raping and killing them. Women were the primary targets.

Below are three testimonies narrated by victims, including a child who managed to escape death after being hit with a hatchet on the head. Even though *fatwas* were issued prohibiting the target of children, fundamentalist violence had an effect on the lives of most Algerian citizens. The purpose of presenting these case studies is not only to uncover the grave human rights violations that have affected women. The aim is also to examine the victims' situations after time has passed.

Malika

I hate the dark, it scares me ... Whenever I hear noises or shouting it all comes back to me. That night I felt like my heart was being ripped from my ribcage .. Two years have passed, my situation has improved, however, the death scenes that I saw will always stay with me ... There are no words to describe that night ... I really don't know how I have survived till today ... Yes, I am still afraid ... It's a fear that one can never get used to."

While recounting the incident Malika's face became cold and ... her voice was so neutral and her tone devoid of any emotion or expression to the extent that one could assume she was recounting events that someone else had experienced... Only the look on her face and her eyes staring at the horizon were evidence that she lived through a horrible tragedy. Malika managed to escape being killed in the massacre of Bentalha because of a fire that prevented the Islamists from getting to her. She was an onlooker to the killing of 200 members of her village including her mother and older sister.

Malika now lives with her father and younger siblings, who scatter around her while she hangs the worn out clothes she has washed. After the death of her mother



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

and elder sister she became responsible for her siblings, the eldest of whom is eleven years old. A terrified and troubled look has replaced the mischievous one normally detected on young peoples' faces and this is especially seen on the face of Ratiba, the youngest of the lot, who is now almost six years old.

One can hardly hear noises in the village of Bentalha, a deadly silence prevails that masks personal agony. Mud and dust is all one can see; the streets, houses, and even the clothes of the inhabitants fail to strike onlookers. The muddy, uneven, and narrow streets are filled with children playing to kill time. The inhabitants are poor and lead a dull, yet normal life. Bentalha, even though only twenty minutes away from the capital, seems like an ancient village. In it one of the worst massacres in the history of Algeria took place in 1997. The death toll in the villages of Bentalha, Rais and Al-Arba'e added up to approximately 1000 individuals, most of whom were slaughtered. Malika's younger siblings were spared because the assailants, in their haste to flee the area, didn't have time to kill them. They were thrown from the window of an apartment where they were hiding; they were on the second floor. They suffered broken bones but they survived.

" It was 11 p.m. when they came ... We were at home, we heard screams and loud noises in the background. Little by little the sounds got nearer ... We could not understand what they were saying ... I knew that the death that we had tried to flee when we left our village

Blat was close ... we came to Bentalha, thinking that it was safer than Blat ... I realized how naive we were ... There was no time to think ... We dashed to our neighbor's house, terror got hold of us, and we scattered aimlessly ... I hid on the roof of a house and my younger siblings hid on its ground floor ... My mother and older sister fled to another neighbor's house. The attackers came from the fields nearby and entered our neighborhood ... I saw

them storm into houses and was about to faint when I heard them entering our house ... I heard the sounds of bloodshed ... sounds of throats being slit. I heard the slain gasp for their last breath ... I heard knives piercing chests, ... dying moans muffled, only the screams of the assailants were heard. I saw them enter the village from the hills nearby. They were wearing Afghani robes, most

of them had bushy disgusting beards with long hair, and some had long nails. They were armed with knives, axes, swords, and rifles.

"I heard them call people by their names and kill them; it was obvious that they were accompanied by people who knew the village well. I couldn't comprehend what was happening. I was shivering and felt I was going to die. I didn't see them slaughtering my mother and two sisters. After the armed men left my father told me what had happened. However, I saw them throw my siblings from the window. Moreover, while hiding on the roof I saw three of the armed men in front of me. I was so terrified I froze. I was unable to utter a word; my throat was so dry and hoarse. One of them looked at me and started waving his knife in my direction. A neighbor grabbed my hand and shoved me toward the rooftop; since the house was on fire they couldn't get to us.

"I screamed a lot but no one came to our rescue. What I saw grieved me a lot. Pools of blood, corpses, and children slaughtered, crying, wailing, and screaming... I felt very paralyzed; death was the only thing real in this surreal tragedy. I felt that God had deserted us, I felt so alone and sensed that no one gave a damn about what had befallen us.

"The murderers remained in the village for six hours. I heard them laughing and saw them enter into a shop to eat before they resumed their deadly mission. Ten minutes after their departure the police arrived ... I really do not know up until now why they didn't come earlier?

"The fields they crossed to get to us were totally destroyed ... but the houses they burned down and ruined were restored rapidly. There were many survivors, given that the village was inhabited by four thousand individuals ... who live in very gloomy, unattractive, and unsafe houses. Many houses had doors made of zinc, which explains the killers' easy access... The houses, shabby and faded, do not offer any security or protection for the inhabitants. Moreover, they lack the refined architectural style old Algerian houses are famous for. "

Malika, who is twenty years old, rarely leaves the house, especially when it's dark. She is in charge of the household and leads a very isolated life. The inhabitants of Bentalha are mostly unemployed, as is the case with very many Algerians. Since the massacre, her unemployed father roams the streets of the village aimlessly. The whole family lives off the 8000 Algerian dinars, equivalent to 100 US dollars, the government allotted to them in compensation to what has befallen them. The endless negotiations and talks aimed at reconciliation do not address the worries and future outlook of Malika. She

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doesn't know the actual killers who massacred her loved ones. All she knows is that everyone is accountable. "I don't support anyone ... I don't know if the killers belong to the Islamist camp or are government people."

Malika's answers are unstructured and fragmented. She doubts everyone and everything: "The Government? Everyone doubts the government ... The army was there and so were members of the patriot guards: Why didn't they intervene to stop what was happening? As soon as the gunmen left they arrived. Why is that? Why didn't they come earlier? Nothing has ended and I really do not understand the highly publicized so called peace and reconciliation they are talking about. Massacres are still taking place. No one cares about us. All they care about is tranquility and peace in the cities and the capital. As far as the villages are concerned, no one cares what happens over there. We are the ones being killed and slaughtered. All I dream about is to be able to leave this country. I am so sick and tired of being afraid. I am still scared of the dark. So are my siblings and my father. There is no guarantee that the murderers will not come back. "

Nacira

Nacira's physical appearance and personality hardly resemble the picture one draws in one's mind. She is barely thirteen years old, fair in complexion with wide eyes. She has a friendly face and often smiles, but her smile rarely reaches her eyes. Her built is weak, her body frail, and her walk unsteady. One notices that she stumbles at times. When I met her she was wearing a red shirt that was too loose on her; it had to be for someone else. Her thick hair covers a head injury she sustained two years ago. With her hands Nacira parted her hair to reveal a very deep scar caused by an ax wound she received on her head when armed men attacked her parents' house in the village of Rais two years ago. Many people died during the attacks, including her mother and brother. Nacira got used to people's curiosity to see her scar. She does not hesitate to show her scar to anyone interested in inspecting it. Her hands move mechanically parting the hair to expose the scar. She recounts to the onlookers the details of the attack in a low, controlled, and expressionless voice. Her answers are short and to the point. Nacira describes the gunmen as "normal people like you and me ... with beards and long hair ... They use our dialect." She continues, "I don't remember much. I saw them kill my mother and younger brother. I was very scared. Upon seeing the armed man moving towards me with an ax in his hand I felt numb all over and fainted." Even though she fainted before she was attacked what she saw is enough to keep her awake at night, even two years later.

Life is ordinary and runs smoothly in Nacira's village; yet, it is not normal. After the incident, the inhabitants of Rais

lead an introverted and lonely life. After the death of her mother and since her father had to move to the city for work, Nacira was forced to move in with some relatives, since she could not live on her own. Her physical state prevents her from leading a normal life. When she leaves the house she has to be accompanied, since the head injury created a cavity to the skull. This renders any minor injury or accident life threatening.

Al-Zhra'

"I live with my two children in my house at the village. I'm a divorcee; my husband left me a long time ago and I know nothing about him. I work as a house-help to make ends meet and feed my family. I feel worthless and cheap after what happened to me. The whole village knows my story. Whenever they see me walking on the street they start talking about what happened to me: 'Look at her. Do you know what happened to her?' They gossip about me blatantly, indifferent to the fact that I can hear them."

"On that day - it was the summer of 1995 - I was home with my two children. My parents were not home. Three armed men broke into the house; the plan was to abduct me. They attacked me and started dragging me towards the door. I resisted. I didn't want to go with them. I knew what awaited me as I had heard many stories about abducted women who are taken to the mountains where they are raped and slaughtered. Many of our female neighbors were abducted and taken to the mountains where they were raped, killed, and thrown in valleys. One of the many women returned to the village after ten days in captivity but refused to say a word about what had happened to her.

"I cried and screamed, imagining what might become of me. I was terrified; my children started crying and clung to me. One of the armed men started hitting me with a razor blade while his accomplice moved towards me. They are monsters, for sure, not human. They had long beards, looked filthy, and had a horrible smell. I knew who they were; they used to live next to our house. Two years prior to my attack, they burned down our house and kicked us out of the village because my brothers were policemen. Given that our village was backed by the Islamists, the armed men got away with murder.

"One of them started telling me that the *Emir* (leader of

I don't remember much. I saw them kill my mother and younger brother. I was very scared.

the group) had ordered them to abduct me, so I had to go with them to the mountains. I sobbed and screamed, 'Why do you want to take me? What have I done in order to warrant such a punishment?' and they answered 'Your brothers are with the Taghout. That is why. You will come with us and we will release you only when they stop working with the government.' I struggled. The more I resisted the deeper the razor knife thrust against my flesh. One of them started undressing me and they raped me one after the other. I cried out, begging them to stop, but they were indifferent; they raped me in my father's house with my children and the entire village as their witnesses. The villagers did not dare interfere at first, but then some summoned up their courage and begged them not to take me with them. They complied and left me bleeding and traumatized with my shocked children surrounding me. I felt I was dying and prayed not to live another day. They violated me in front of the villagers and my children."

"After the incident I started visiting a psychiatric help center in my village. I go there twice a week, yet I still feel very insecure. I am barely surviving ... I have no life, no friends, and sometimes no food ... Our society is harsh, there is no compassion ... We Arabs are merciless. Even though people witnessed what happened to me they still consider me an outcast ... I was rejected by my own people even though I was not to blame ... The terror still persists ... They would be lying if they say it is over ... Wander around and you will see them ... Nothing changed for them ... We were the ones who were violated and no one really cares."

"I am lost; I no longer dream. All my earlier dreams vanished. Whenever I am reminded of the incident I wish I were dead."

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

Kurdish Women in Iraq

When Kirkuk, the Iraqi city heavily populated with Kurds, fell last April after the defeat of Saddam Hussein's armed forces, thousands of Kurds returned to the city they were expelled from, the city they consider their capital. Among the endless queues of cars and pedestrians were several old military pickups with female peshmerga (Kurdish

fighters) in them. The women and girls whose ages ranged between 18 and 45 wore green uniforms and waved their arms in joy. They roamed around the city in their military pickups watching the return of the Kurds. Unlike Western women fighters, these women are not professional fighters, they comprise only a hundred persons and lack heavy weaponry.

Tinor, who is barely twenty-six years old, could not believe that she had returned to the city from which she and her family were expelled. They had suffered a lot at the hands of the Iraqi forces. The Iraqi soldiers forced her father to leave Kirkuk and imprisoned her uncle in 1995. That was their punishment for refusing to join the Baath party and renounce their Kurdish identity. Tinor asserts that the Kurds have endured the worst atrocities at the hands of Saddam's regime. Kurds were forced to renounce their Kurdish identity and adopt the Arab one: if they declined, displacement, imprisonment, or hanging was the punishment. The mass killings and forced displacement were the main reasons that Tinor joined the Kurdish women fighters who aimed to liberate the Kurdish people. Tinor enlisted in 1997, in the Kurdish city of Sulaimanyya in the self-rule area that was outside the control of the Iraqi regime. There, she received military training. She had no qualms about a US invasion and all she wanted was for the US to bring down the ruling Iraqi regime.

According to Lieutenant Sarwat Ismail, the supervisor who commands the women's brigade, "Most of the women and girl fighters have lost loved ones as a result of the regime's infamous massacres where thousands of Kurds were killed. The Kurds lived for the day the regime would fall, it's the only thought that kept them going and succeeded in lifting their spirits. We are very happy that the regime fell and we can now enjoy our freedom."

Although women increasingly join the peshmerga, that does not imply that Kurdish women are predominantly in it or that they are active participants in political debates or political life. Kurds belong to tribes that are conservative and traditional, and so it is hard for women to break away from the conservative chains imposed on them. Kurds have suffered grave human rights violations and endured internal displacement and massacres for decades. However, Kurdish women suffered more given that they sometimes suddenly found themselves heads of households responsible for the sustenance of their families.

Sadriat, who is in her late forties, survived Saddam Hussein's infamous 1988 Anfal campaign. His regime accused the Kurds of collaborating with Iran against Iraq, so he ordered his troops to demolish many Kurdish villages. Around 4,000 villages were erased and 200,000 Kurds killed. It is believed that many Kurds were trans-

ported to Iraq's southwestern desert where they were executed and buried in mass graves. Sadria lost her husband, brother, and his four children. After the massacre, she moved with what was left of her family to Shamshamal refugee camp in the Kurdish area, a short distance from where Iraqi soldiers were stationed. After the fall of the regime, the situation changed but Sadria and her family still live in the refugee camp awaiting financial help that will enable them to return to their village and rebuild their house.

Sadria cannot hold back her tears as she recalls the horrors of Anfal. She now lives with her elderly mother, who barely remembers her age. All she recalls with certainty is that she experienced the terror of World War II at a very young age. Over the years several wars took place, since there were so many she fails to remember them all.

"Since a very young age I've experienced nothing but the miseries of war ... All I know is wars ... wars, wars ... Who in Gods name wants that? I want to live in peace. I literally have no one left. My son and his children were murdered ... What do you know about our suffering?" On this sad note the elderly lady ends her conversation and withdraws, refusing to say anything more; remembering is too painful.

Close to Erbil in northern Iraq one finds the refugee camp of Benswala where thousands of Kurdish refugees live. They were deported from Kirkuk and other areas under the Iraqi rule. Around a million Iraqi Kurds left their homes in 1991, a quarter of whom were subject to Saddam Hussein's policy of Kurdish annihilation. Practiced for decades in order to restore the imbalance in the population, Saddam Hussein allowed the Kurds the chance to stay only if they renounced their non-Arab heritage and registered themselves as Arabs. He also forced Kurds out of Kirkuk and brought in Arabs, mostly from the South, a policy most Kurds refer to as Saddam's version of ethnic cleansing. Most Arabs who moved there received free accommodation; they were offered the houses of the displaced Kurds to live in as a present from Saddam Hussein. "We were coerced to change our nationality ... to become Arabs if we wanted to stay."

Rahmeh, a Kurdish woman from Kirkuk, recounts that her family was expelled from their village after her brothers refused to join Al-Quds army, most of whose soldiers were Kurds who had been forced to join. She asserts: "We were visited by members of the Baath Party who urged my brothers to join their party or do their military service. After my brothers refused they threw us out of



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

Kirkuk. I am certain that our future will be better now that the reign of Saddam Hussein is over."

When people describe Iraqi Kurdistan, they admit that it is a big refugee camp, although the months that followed the fall of the regime have slightly improved the situation. Most inhabitants in the refugee camps are survivors of the many wars that befell the country. Today chaos prevails regarding the return of refugees who await financial help to be able to go back to their villages and rebuild their demolished houses. A lot of killings and confrontations were reported among Arabs, Turkumans, and Kurds as a result of the deportations and confiscation of houses that took place in the earlier period.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

Kuwaiti Women and the Invasion of Kuwait in 1990

The end of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's reign coincided with the uncovering of painful and horrifying facts. The frequent discovery of mass graves in Iraq is one of the most painful daily occurrences. Whenever a new mass grave is discovered hundred of mothers and family members

rush in a desperate attempt to find out what had happened to their loved ones who had disappeared several years ago. Among the disappeared are six hundred Kuwaitis captured by the Iraqi army during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Among the Kuwaiti families awaiting news of their loved ones is Mashael's family; they live for the day they find the body (corpse) of Badr, the eldest brother, captured by the Iraqi army during the Iraqi Invasion.

The man whether a brother, father, or son is the head of the household and the provider.

While Mashael recounts the details of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the abduction of her brother, one have a feeling that the events took place yesterday and not thir-

teen years ago. Mashael narrates the story with emotion: "I was 18 years old, I had dreams, dreams that most girls of my age shared, namely graduating and securing a university degree, getting married, and starting a family of my own. I still remember the first few seconds that followed the Iraqi invasion. It was dawn ... I can still hear the deafening sounds emanating from the Iraqi Helicopters. It was shockingly unexpected."

Mashael continues: "Badr was very disturbed and furious because of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The assault affected him tremendously to an extent that he lost his voice and was unable to speak on the first day of the occupation. He communicated with us by using sign language. The following day, on the 4th of August 1990, Badr left the house in the evening and never came back. His friends informed us that the Iraqi army captured him off the streets. We can never forget that day, the years are passing and the pain is still terrible."

Badr was taken into custody when he was barely 20 years old. His widowed mother and two sisters are still suffering as a result of his absence. His mother recounts while weeping: "Badr was very young when they arrested him. Being the 'man of the house' he used to take care of us. He was very kind and affectionate. Since they arrested him I have been living against my will. Living without him is very difficult."

Mashael admits that due to Badr's absence she had to be in charge of the family. She asserts: "We are an Eastern conservative family and the presence of a man is highly needed in our society. The man whether a brother, father, or son is the head of the household and the provider. Hence, Badr's abduction robbed us of our provider and we are left alone, four women, to fend for our self with no man to protect us. I am now the head of the household and am responsible for all matters that are usually relegated to the men in the family. For instance, I take the car to the garage in case it breaks down. Moreover, I am expected to handle all transactions in ministries. This in our society is usually a man's job. You rarely find women in such places (garages, ministries, etc). We feel very alone, isolated and lifeless. We no longer mingle with people because we are unpleasant company. People get depressed when around us so we cut-off ourselves from people."

The Iraqi government took advantage of the long-standing territorial dispute with Kuwait to justified its invasion by claiming that Kuwait was a southern Iraqi province and was therefore rightfully Iraq's. Besides, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was nonchalant about openly declaring his ulterior motives namely possessing the material resources (fuel and money) that belonged to

Kuwait. According to Saddam Hussein, Iraq had defended all the Gulf region against the threat the Khomeini regime posed and so Kuwait had to contribute to the war expenses.

Despite the fact that during the Iran-Iraq conflict, Kuwait and most countries of the Gulf sided with Iraq, Saddam Hussein went ahead and invaded Kuwait. His actions shocked and angered the Kuwaitis a great deal. They regretted ever supporting Saddam Hussein ... Saddam's forces thus invaded Kuwait in August 1990 and declared it as its 19th province. Kuwait was under siege for a period of seven months after which the U.S.-led coalition launched operation "Desert Storm" thus forcing Saddam Hussein to retreat.

For seven months the Iraqi army imposed a brutal security regime on Kuwait ... theft, larceny, destruction, abduction, arrests, torture and killings are but a few of the many violations the Kuwaitis had to endure. Schools and governmental institutions were turned into detention centers ... The Iraqis systematically looted Kuwait and destroyed what they could not take with them. Government property ... oil fields were set on fire and Kuwait's days were turned into night.

Grave human rights violations were committed by the Iraqi troops. As a result of the Iraqi invasion, 500 Kuwaitis died after suffering the worst kinds of torture that included beatings, whipping, burns, acid baths, electric shocks, electric drills, amputating joints, cutting off ears and tongues, gouging of eyes, dismemberment and ax beatings, as well as extracting nails. Iraqi troops in their detention centers committed brutal acts of violence and left a large numbers of victims thus causing enormous human suffering to the Kuwaiti population.

Um Mansour, who currently lives in one of the suburbs of the Kuwaiti capital Kuwait city along with her youngest son, is another victim of war. She suffered greatly because of the Iraqi invasion. She lost her eldest son, Mansour, and was incarcerated along with her two remaining sons, Saleh and Mohammad during the invasion. She was held prisoner along with her youngest son, Mohammad, in the Iraqi detention centers found in the South of Iraq. They were freed during the Shiite uprising in 1991.

Mohammad, who was very young when his brother was captured and killed, recounts: My brother's body was found in a garbage dump next to our house in Kuwait. He was disfigured beyond recognition due to the torture by electric shocks he was subjected to. Moreover, his nails were extracted. While Mohammad was talking his mother was weeping and lamenting the loss of her sons. Since

the invasion she lost the ability to speak and so crying is her only means of expressing her grieve. Mohammad continues: "My mother is still very affected by what has befallen us, our house is filled with pictures of my two brothers. My mother cries all day and thinks of nothing but her misfortune. She lost a son in a tragic way and knows nothing about her other son. We are re-living the tragedy each and every day."

Rape

Among the many problems suffered by the Kuwaiti people as a result of the Iraqi invasion is the issue of rape and mass rape. A number of girls and women were subject to sexual assault at the hands of the Iraqi soldiers. Eyewitness accounts arising from the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait confirmed that the Iraqi regime committed grave sexual assault. Moreover, government officials also confirmed the existence of rape. In a conservative society like Kuwait talking about such matters is a taboo. Given that rape is a very sensitive subject to discuss, many families, whose women have been raped, cover up the matter and surround it with a veil of secrecy. It is practically impossible to find a rape victim willing to openly talk about what had happened to her. However, many Kuwaiti detainees testify that they witnessed women being raped by Iraqi soldiers.

It has been estimated that around 700 Kuwaiti girls and women were raped, by Iraqi soldiers, during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Rapes were either carried out in front of those women's parents or in Iraqi camps. Treating rape victims in Kuwait was handled very delicately, a lot of secrecy surrounds this issue till date. In order to conceal the identity of the victims no names were mentioned, victims were referred to by numbers. Because of the rape crisis, the grand Mufti of Al-Azhar issued a *fatwa* declaring abortion legal if performed on rape victims who got impregnated by Iraqi soldiers. However, the issue of raped women who got impregnated and gave birth is still an unresolved one in Kuwait. Moreover, it is important to note that those women are outcasts in their own society and are still struggling to be reintegrated into Kuwaiti society.

Adel Al-Mutairi, a university professor and Imam, is another victim of war. He was detained during the Iraqi invasion on pretext that he was a member of the Kuwaiti resistance. He was then sentenced to death and narrow-

*Several soldiers
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ly escaped death one day before his execution after being freed thanks to the uprising in the South of Iraq. Adel admits that he endured brutalities and torture at the hands of the Iraqi soldiers. Yet, he asserts that what affected him the most was witnessing the rape of girls and women in front of their families. He recounts: "On the eighth day of the invasion the soldiers brought in the sister of one of the prisoners detained with us. Several soldiers tore at her clothes wildly while the girl screamed hysterically till she fainted. They assaulted her and gang raped her consecutively in front of us. After witnessing the rape of his sister, her brother lost his mind. God help him. I can still hear her cries and pleas; she suffered a lot." Adel asserts that as a result of the war, he witnessed horrifying rapes that he will never forget. He recounts that most rape victims were gravely assaulted and their screams and cries used to echo throughout the camp. Those women were seriously traumatized and they are currently undergoing treatment. Their progress, however, is very slow.

The Iraqi regime detained around 6000 hostages that included Kuwaiti men, women and children as well as foreign nationals. Sometimes entire families were captured randomly off the streets or were arrested for secretly engaging in resistance activities to counter the occupation ... Some hostages were freed and their return was facilitated by the red cross when the occupation ended. Moreover, a great number of detainees were liberated during the Shiite uprising that followed Kuwait's liberation and that took place in the South of Iraq in 1991. Unlike the detainees held in the southern parts of Iraq, those jailed in Baghdad remained in prison. The fate of the 600 remaining prisoners is still unknown, yet, it is worth mentioning that following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime the bodies of around 8 Kuwaiti prisoners were found in mass graves in Iraq.

Among the 600 remaining detainees there are around 65 foreign nationals. Amongst them is a Lebanese woman, Daad Al-Hariri, born and raised in Kuwait, who was taken prisoner by Iraqi forces for being active in the Kuwaiti national resistance. Her remains were found thirteen years later, through DNA testing, in a mass grave in Al-Samawah area in Iraq in July 2003. Reports confirm that she was executed, along with several other prisoners of war, in 1991. Daad's family suffered a lot throughout those thirteen years. Her father's only wish was to see his daughter before he died. He passed away in 1998 without fulfilling his wish. Her mother spent the past thirteen years hoping she will see her daughter again. She now leads a lonely and miserable life.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

Western Sahara: A Forgotten Crisis

The Western Sahara is one of the last unresolved issues in North Africa. Due to its location south of Morocco, east of Algeria and north of Mauritania it has been subject to incessant regional political interferences.

In 1975, Spain withdrew from the area after having occupied it for over ninety years. Spain had barely left when Moroccan forces entered and took control over the Sahara, claiming a historical right of sovereignty over this land. And since then, an armed conflict has pitted the Sahrawis, who demand independence, against Morocco, which wants to extend its sovereignty over the region. Various other parties and states have also become players in the conflict. In 1991, a ceasefire was announced in accordance to a UN-sponsored peace plan and, to this day, the international body is still trying to work out a peace settlement.

In the depths of the Saharan desert lies a tiny, desolate republic called the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which was called as such by the Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el-Hamra y Rio de Oro, better known as the Polisario Front. This republic stretches along the borders with Morocco, and the Front has been locked in a bitter conflict with the Moroccan forces, in what has become the longest conflict in North Africa. There are two main groups: one lives in the Saharan region controlled by Morocco since 1975, while the largest part lives as migrants in border camps near Tinduf, south of Algeria, while still and others are in Northern Mauritania.

The Tinduf camps enjoy a semblance of self-rule, as the Polisario has controlled the region since it was officially established in 1973, decades after fighting the Spanish colonialists and later the Moroccan forces. There, in the depths of the desert, clusters of homes are spread out on a piece of land that has no strategic importance, except for that long-forgotten conflict.

The mud houses and tents barely provide any protection to the 150,000 Sahrawis living there. Drinking water is scarce and the living conditions are bad, while the camps have managed to survive thanks to the scanty help they obtain.

In this inhospitable environment, Sahrawi women walk in the streets in colored dresses, grabbing the attention



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

of outsiders and bringing warmth into the mud houses and alleys. With their rich variety of bright colors, they create a sense of vitality amidst the lusterless sand. The role they play in the camps is easy to note, as they are the ones who almost entirely organize life in the camps, given that most men live there only intermittently, when they return from their army service. The majority of men are almost always absent. And those men who are not in the army wander into the Sahara for several months to herd the cattle. So the women are generally left alone to care for the family and manage the camps.

This reality has imposed certain roles on women, who hold positions in the Polisario Front committees and councils as well as in administration and education. They are also in charge of the family and their households. Most often, the Sahrawi women are bold, and give the impression that they run the desert camps. Despite the harsh living conditions, the Sahrawi

refugees try to hold on to their traditions. Marriage for instance is greatly encouraged by the Sahrawis and the Polisario itself, as the Front organizes the wedding ceremonies and offers a place of residence to newly-weds, which is in fact a mud house. It also pays for the weddings of those couples wishing to raise new generations of "revolutionaries"!

Sayla is a young Sahrawi woman, besides her household responsibilities, she is pursuing her education. Like so many Sahrawi women, she has gone through military training in camps especially set up for women in the depths of the desert. According to Sayla: "I like to learn and work, and whatever a man does, a woman can do as well. In the summer, the students return from the cities where they are learning and us women, we hold military training sessions to learn how to carry weapons and fight. We are still calling for our independence, and despite the fact that there have been no armed clashes

for a while, we need to be always prepared and cannot relinquish our dream of having our own independent state one day.”

Sayla’s mother, Om Said, lives without her husband and sons, who have reached the stage of university education. The men in her family go into the Sahara for several months in a row. It is worthy noting that there is a real effort to achieve high educational standards, despite the harsh conditions. When the refugee centers were initially formed in Tinduf, the level of education was extremely low and illiteracy was widespread. But today, these camps boast one of the most successful educational systems in the African continent.

The rate of illiteracy has dropped to five percent. Moreover, to eradicate illiteracy, schools and centers have been established throughout the camps. A Polisario committee sends students of both genders to pursue their studies abroad. As a result of the long Spanish colonization, most Sahrawis are fluent in Spanish, which is their second language in school after Arabic. Very often, Spanish non-governmental organizations go to the camps and offer aid to the Sahrawis. Some organizations even sponsor organized summer camps for Sahrawi children in Spain or elsewhere in Europe. Cuba also offers aid to the Sahrawis, as many young Sahrawis have been to Cuba for training and educational trips.

We have been forced to live in this harsh nature, ... with no clear future for either us or our children.

Alia, a young Sahrawi woman in her early 30s, studied medicine in Cuba for twelve years. She returned to practice in the Sahara, despite the harsh conditions and scarcity of medical resources. “The medical equipment here is very rare. I brought this stethoscope with me from Cuba, for example. We practice in very difficult conditions. Look at the sphygmomanometer for instance; I also brought it with me

from Cuba. There is little we can get here as far as medical equipment and gear.” As she talked, Alia diagnosed a child at the hospital, which is really a set of rooms made of compacted mud and whose beds are no more than shabby mattresses laid out on the floor. “What the children suffer from most is malnutrition,” Alia says, as she looks sadly at a child who’s barely three years old and is stretched out on the floor, as his mother gets his medication.

Nutrition is a great problem for the camps’ residents; their food resources are very limited and often their scarce produce is mixed with the sand that blows at any time and stops at nothing. Sometimes even, that is all the Sahrawis can eat.

Even though the clashes have ceased, the Sahrawis still live with the belief that one day, war could resume and they could be displaced once again. After running away from Ayoon in 1975 when the Moroccan army went into the Sahara, Aziza lives with her family, her only certainty being that the future is unknown. “This life we live was forced upon us by war, and we have been here ever since our nation was divided among three states, Morocco, Mauritania, and Spain. We refuse to live as anything but free. We were forced to seek refuge in Algeria, which gave us this region. We have been forced to live in this harsh nature, amidst the sweltering heat and sand storms, with no clear future for either us or our children.”

As she stood before the mud house where she and her family live, the sky suddenly started to change and turned into a sandy, dusky color, erasing the line between the desert’s sand the approaching sandstorm. In these weather conditions, there is no real refuge for the hundreds of families, for whom sand has become an integral part of their water, air, and food. Aziza, who is a fifty-year-old, compact woman, smiles when describing how she lives during these storms: “When the wind gets strong, it can destroy some of the houses, and we remain in our tent until it falls, and then, we wait for the storm to settle, and we start sowing and building a tent all over again. Such is our life, and this has become a natural reality to us.” Safia, Aziza’s eldest daughter, has become used to life’s harshness in the camps, and considers her life normal and, mostly, better than if she had to live in a region merged to Morocco, even if this would bring more comfort than the sad life in the camp.

The Sahrawi families live on the aid the Front regularly offers to all the refugees, which includes food, tents and clothing, but not money. The United Nations, certain governments, and non-governmental organizations also help.

While Aziza struggles to set up a new tent every time the sand blows away her family’s tent, there are hundreds like her who wait for their fate to be determined; but so far, their hopes have regularly vanished into thin air and all that is left for Aziza is to wait, as waiting seems to be the only choice she has left.

Translated by Lynn Maalouf