

# The Case of Samar Alami

## ■ Diana Mukalled

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In one of the cells of the high-security Holloway prison in North London, Samar Alami waits for eleven years to pass, having already spent nine years of her life there.

She was barely 31 when British courts sentenced her and her friend, Jawad Botmeh, for involvement in the 1994 bombing in London of the Israeli embassy and the Balfour House, both of which injured nineteen people.

Today Samar is 39 years old. Like Jawad, she graduated from a British university. They are both accused of affiliation with a small, radical group headquartered in Britain, which planned to foil the Middle East peace process. Both Samar and Jawad have strongly refuted this accusation.

They were condemned in 1996, even though the case was closed, the issues were not all resolved. In fact, to this day many questions remain unanswered. In recent years, new evidence and facts have appeared that indicate that intelligence services, security services, and maybe even governments were involved in this case, even though the accusations were limited to these two young people, who embody the suffering of the

Palestinian people at home and abroad. Their story remains a mystery, reminiscent of a detective story; in this case, however, many secrets are meant to be kept as such.

Samar Alami is a Palestinian girl from Gaza, born of a Lebanese mother from the Osseiran family. She was born in 1965 in Lebanon, where she lived until her early twenties. Her father Sami was the head of the Arab Bank in Beirut. She enrolled at the American University of Beirut, and then moved to Britain where she obtained a BA and then a MSc in chemical engineering from Imperial College. She is highly educated and, during her studies, was known to be a fervent activist on issues related to women's rights, the Palestinian cause, and human rights in general.

But today Samar is secluded at the Holloway prison, where visitors are allowed only three times a month. Her elderly parents and her twin sister Randa have moved to London to stay close to her.

Time goes by very slowly in prison. Samar spends it doing various prison activities, working at the library, studying, as well as reading and drawing.

When I met Samar in prison, she seemed younger than her age and not very different from the photos I had seen of her. Despite her faith in her innocence, it wasn't easy bringing her to talk about the case in which she is paying the price for an act she did not commit.

"Jawad and I have been in prison since the beginning of 1995, for a case we have no relation to at all," she says. "All that links us to it is the fact that we tried to defend our people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and this right and duty were exploited to make us appear as terrorists. They twisted everything we did and thought in a manner that would make us appear as the ones responsible for the bombing of the Israeli embassy. But we have nothing to do with this."

According to Samar and Jawad, the Israeli embassy bombing in London could not serve their goal. The Palestinians' experience in the 1970s, with all the acts of aggression in Europe, failed to explain the reality of the Palestinian cause. That is why the conviction came as a surprise to them. During the court sessions, Samar went to court carrying a red flower. She was convinced that her innocence and that of Jawad were obvious. She wasn't worried that the case would reach the point it did. "The second the sentence was announced was the worst thing that could happen to me. I had the feeling right before that something wrong was about to happen. It was a terrible moment. Twenty years fell upon me like a cold shower, when the judge announced the sentence. Yes, I was expecting them to try and blame us, but I didn't expect things to reach this point."

The sentence of Samar and Jawad appeared logical, even necessary, to many people. "The evil couple," the "two bombers," the "terrorists," "the salon revolutionaries" (in reference to their cultural and social background): Samar and Jawad were given many names in the press. Any hint that they could be innocent or that there could be a flaw in the trial seemed like abuse, amidst this media campaign.

The prominent British lawyer Gareth Peirce, who is extremely active in the defense of human rights issues, believes in the innocence of Samar and Jawad. Peirce, like numerous other people, is firmly convinced that a great mistake was made. She handled several previous cases that later were shown to involve miscarriages of justice. Her most important case was one that shook British public opinion in the late 1980s, that of the Gilford Four and Birmingham Six, named after the cities where nightclubs were blown up, killing scores of people.

This case was turned into the hit movie, released in the early 1990s, called "In the name of the Father." Several

Irish people were accused of carrying out these bombings in London nightclubs and were sentenced to fifteen to twenty years in prison; in the end, it appeared that there had been a miscarriage of justice, after the accused had spent their full terms in jail. Peirce proved the innocence and the error of the trial, in a series of famous sessions that were fraught with political meddling.

Just as Peirce was convinced of the innocence of her clients in the Irish case, she is today convinced of the innocence of Samar and Jawad. She has tried to prove their innocence since the beginning, in collaboration with the defense team.

According to her, as in many cases in which people were mistakenly convicted, people who usually don't know, who have limited experience, and who cannot help themselves are those who are usually innocent. To this day, she explains, we still don't know who carried out the bombing, and we still don't know what the political motives were. "What I am absolutely convinced of is that Samar and Jawad did not carry out these bombings," she says.

During the two-year investigation, it appeared that Samar and Jawad had rented a storage box in the Nationwide self storage building, west of London. In the box were found chemical materials and TATP power to fabricate explosives and two pistols as well as various publications, magazines, and books. But it was proven that the material found in the storage box was not the same as that used for the embassy bombing.

Samar and Jawad maintained that the quantities of material found in the storage were very limited and were intended for making bomblets. According to Samar, they were meant to be used in the Occupied Territories, not in Britain. They said that a person had given them the explosives material and then disappeared. That person remains unidentified to this day. There are in fact several aspects of the case that remain mysterious. For instance, the kind of explosives used in both incidents is not known. The material found in the storage box could not have been used for the bombings, given the latter's advanced technology. It is not known where the explosives were made. Many fingerprints were found, but the identities of the persons remain unknown.

The woman who drove the car that carried the explosives was not Samar. The bombing was extremely precise and didn't leave any trace of timing equipment or detonators.

The case was long and the story complicated, said the court judge. It's like assembling the pieces of a large jigsaw puzzle, where most of the pieces are lost. No one

knows who's responsible for the bombings. There are many questions to which the court judge responded: "Simply, we don't know." Two years after the bombing, the judge ruled that the evidence was "all circumstantial."

All the other suspects were cleared, except Samar and Jawad. Judge Garland at the Old Bailey court described the ten weeks of the trial as like "trying to hold on to soap in the bathtub."

Samar and Jawad insisted on their innocence, but the jury found them guilty. Jawad did confess that he was involved in buying both the car that blew up and the chemical material used to make the explosives. As for Samar, she confessed to having been involved in making the explosives. The judge accused them of starting a war in London and of carrying out terrorist acts. Samar and Jawad were friends. Their political activism against Israel was public and obvious. The prosecutors considered this activism as evidence of their involvement in terrorist activities.

Peirce believes that because the prosecutors decided to convict Samar and Jawad, they dropped the charges against other suspects. But questions remain, she adds, as to which party this bombing served and in whose interest it was? "It was always too easy to say that these two people were against the peace process and that this was all the case was about. Despite this, the sentence was imposed in this simplistic way to account for the bombing."

When Samar's house was searched, the police found a sketch map of Sidon, with her fingerprints on it. The map had been drawn by Randa, Samar's sister when she had wanted to visit friends there. The police and the prosecutors insisted that the map depicted the area where the Balfour House was located, in north London.

Peirce traveled to Lebanon and to Sidon specifically to check the map drawn on a notebook, and she returned with evidence that destroyed this evidence in court. Peirce considers this as a sample of the details which the police used to try to avoid having the real culprits incriminated.

### **Incarceration**

Between 1992 and 1993, Samar and Jawad started considering ways to support the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian resistance inside the occupied territories.

"I used to view myself as a Palestinian living and studying in Britain," says Samar. "At the same time, I was trying to use my presence here in order to build strong rela-

tions with people and familiarize them with the Palestinian cause. I felt I was part of a people, and I tried with Jawad to contribute to changing the reality and confronting the suffering and injustice."

Samar and Jawad tried to think of ways to make homemade explosives, to teach Palestinians in the territories how to produce them to help them in the resistance. They were considering sending information on this material to the Occupied Territories and publishing it there, once they learned how to make these explosives.

These experiments became a major part of incriminating evidence against them during the trial, even though there was never proof of a link between these experiments and the actual bombing. Samar and Jawad tried to devise home-made explosives from material that could be found in any kitchen or grocery store. They conducted tests with materials that wouldn't be prohibited by Israeli censors, such as nail polish remover, hair dye, or shampoo.

Samar says: "There was nothing remarkable about what we were thinking about. All that we meant to do was to help develop the means of resistance. Our experiments were minor and basic. By all means, they were only modest attempts."

Peirce believes that what the two young people did was naïve, but had nothing to do with bombing the Israeli embassy: "There is no doubt, and Samar and Jawad agree with me, that many things they did were extremely stupid. This is not to incriminate them morally or politically, but simply to say that they exposed themselves to a great danger as a result of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of their attitude. Their former interests were like the kiss of death in their case. The truth is that they had common interests and individual ones; and their preparations of defensive weapons meant to be used in the Occupied Territories took up half the defense work in their case. All this needed to be clarified. The jury had no understanding whatsoever, and had no idea of international politics, except from a narrow perspective regarding the Palestinians, one close to the Israeli perspective."

The fate of Samar and Jawad was also linked to this case through a mysterious person they met in 1992. That man, whom they say bought with Jawad chemical explosive materials and convinced Samar to stock them for him, disappeared a few days before the bombing and never resurfaced. Two years prior to the embassy bombing, Samar and Jawad had met that person, who claimed his name was Rida Mughrabi. *The Independent* published a sketch of that man; the paper's correspondent Robert Fisk visited the two accused in the company of a

professional artist, who took from them the description of the so-called Mughrabi Samar and Jawad said the sketch resembled the man.

Mughrabi claimed that he was from the West Bank, that he had taught at a refugee camp in Jordan and fought the Israelis in South Lebanon in the early 1980s. He said he left Lebanon after a disagreement with the PLO. He worked in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and then moved to Birmingham in Britain after the Gulf war. Samar and Jawad never wondered why that person had suddenly appeared in their lives. Their meetings with him were infrequent and took place in London cafés. He was the one who called them, and they never met him in his own place or met anyone he knew. Samar and Jawad clung to him because of the time he had spent in Israeli jails and his work with the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon. Or at least, that's what he claimed.

In 1993, Mughrabi began discussing with Samar and Jawad weapons that could be made available to the Palestinians inside the Occupied Territories. In March 1994, they started talking about techniques to make explosives. Neither Samar nor Jawad ever openly discussed with Mughrabi their experiments, but he seemed to have hands on experience in that field. He talked in an interesting way about things that had happened, and implied that he had gained his practical experience during Israel's invasion of Lebanon.

According to Samar, "Rida Mughrabi is confusing. At first, we felt that he was part of the national Palestinian movement. We felt that he had hands on experience, and that's what pushed us to work with him; but the truth is that we were wrong in dealing with people without taking enough precautions. That person put us in a situation we have nothing to do with, and disappeared." Samar and Jawad believe that Rida Mughrabi set them up in an intelligent way.

As for Peirce, she believes that the British police did not make enough efforts to investigate Mughrabi, saying "the police is not interested at all in Rida Mughrabi; they claim that such person does not exist. There are people involved in acts of aggression, and have not been tried. There was clearly a person who signed the name of George Davis, who was involved in buying the cars, and it was clear that a person called George Davis was involved in other activities. It is clear that a woman, or a man disguised as a woman, parked the car near the Israeli embassy, and it was admitted that none of these people were the accused. So it's neither Samar nor Jawad."

In March 1994, Samar attempted new experiments, but

she failed and this failure led to an incident with Rida Mughrabi. They met and she told him about her failure in making an explosive out of acetone and hydrogen. Her last contact with him was on July 13, 1994, two weeks before the embassy bombing. He asked to see her, and they met on a street in London. He said that he had carried out some experiments and had something that could help her which he wanted to give her. Samar says that she acted against her instinct at that moment, and felt that things were going in the wrong direction. She hesitated, but ended up accepting two boxes from him, which she carried from his car to hers. The box included TATP, which is used for explosives, and there were also timers and other things.

Rida said that he was leaving and, after he gave her the two boxes, she never saw him again. He disappeared. Samar speaks about her last meeting with him, in a very distrustful way, saying: "It was a very strange encounter. There are many people who come to Britain and leave things behind. But what was stranger was his hesitation when he gave me the boxes. At first, I thought it was unnatural. I was bothered by the fact that usually, I don't act in such a naïve way, but I thought that maybe he was going through some important phase and had something on his mind. I felt that something was wrong, but I didn't give it enough thought, and I ended up keeping with me something I never should have kept."

Samar and Jawad decided to put the two boxes temporarily in an empty apartment belonging to a relative of hers. They later rented under false names a storage box at the Nationwide self storage, and put the two boxes there. Jawad added: "Up to that point, we had only been experimenting with negligible quantities, in my kitchen; but in one day, the quantities changed, and even though they weren't considerable, they marked a qualitative leap from what we were familiar with, as far as what they were and what they could do. So we decided to put them in a storage box, wanting to get rid of the material as quickly as possible."

Five months passed between the date of the bombing and their arrest. But neither Jawad nor Samar could decide to get rid of the storage box or its contents; instead, they hid some books and notes related to their experiments. According to Samar: "We were afraid there would be a reaction similar to what happened during the Gulf war [1991] when people were being randomly arrested. It was a period filled with questionings and confusion regarding the embassy bombing, and the real motive. Also, my encounters with Rida further raised my doubts, but we didn't know what we should do."

The prosecution considered that what had been discovered in their storage box was what was left of the chemical material that was used to make the explosives. But the investigations didn't prove that the material that was found in the storage, and specifically the TATP, was used in the explosion, and the courts' experts even doubted this hypothesis, saying that TATP is an unstable material that was not suitable for that purpose. The court finally decided that there was a unanimous agreement that this material hadn't been used in either of the two bombings.

Rida Mughrabi disappeared, leaving big question marks behind. According to Samar, not only did he leave many questions, but he also left her and Jawad in an insecure situation: "We did not participate in the embassy bombing operation; it's not that we don't want to confess, it's because we really have no relation with it, and Rida Mughrabi left us in a situation that we are not responsible for in any way."

Officials from the anti-terrorist branch testified during the trial that there was a flaw in the investigations regarding this case. There was a lot of talk about Israeli security fears. It was noteworthy that the day the sentence was issued, the media that usually talked about the need to tighten security around Jewish centers decided to focus on Jawad and Samar, depicting them as individuals hostile to Jews. Suddenly, they focused on the fact that Samar had participated in a public meeting in London, where Shimon Peres had spoken.

The press and the prosecution presented this as if Samar had gone to the meeting to determine the target of her attack. Peirce says: "It is clear that the Israeli embassy was the target of the bombing. The embassy's staff were prosecution witnesses, and whatever cooperation they had in this case, it was exclusively between the Israelis, the prosecution and the British scientists. We still believe that we were not given a full report on what the Israeli experts found when they went to the scene of the bombing. It is worth noting that Israeli scientists visited the crime scene, and not only that, but they also interviewed eyewitnesses, which is understandable. But the prosecution didn't do anything similar, and did not interrogate any witnesses. That is why, to this day, there are certain aspects of the scientific investigation that could help in elucidating this case, and they are neither in the hands of the prosecution, nor are we aware of them."

The case did not end in 1996 with the prosecution of Samar and Jawad; the defense lacked significant information during the trial, and later during the appeal. Several closed hearings were held under the Law on

Public Interest Immunity (PII), which gives the government the authority to withhold certain evidence in order to protect national security. These sessions were used to keep secret information related to evidence that could benefit the defense, including information that the British intelligence had about a warning the Israeli embassy received before the incident. This information had been withheld from the defense. The sessions also prevented the disclosure of information related to the investigations of the British and Israeli government regarding the two explosions. The sentence was issued, even though this information remained secret.

Secret intelligence reports also mentioned the possibility that the attack against the Israeli embassy could be part of the secret war between Iran and Israel or even done by Israel. Information leaks caused this speculation, based on the ease with which the attack was carried out against the embassy. Were the Israelis trying to highlight the frailty of their security, after the British authorities had refused to enhance the embassy's protection and had prohibited Mossad from working on its territory?

In 1999, the court of appeal held a secret session in the presence of the public prosecution. During the session, the public prosecution confirmed the truth that the British intelligence had received a warning about an attack, which hadn't been disclosed during the trial. Given that the trial wasn't fair, the court of appeal gave Samar and Jawad the right to appeal the sentence. But the last appeal also failed, and presently their lawyers are proposing to bring the case to the European court. But this will take at least two to three years.

Their lawyer Gareth Peirce comments: "Naturally, I'm worried that there is a real danger that they could spend the whole term of their sentence in jail."

Samar and Jawad follow the developments in their case from prison. Peirce describes this as another case of miscarriage of justice, saying "we don't have the ability to know what was hidden and we don't care to know. These matters will remain classified until the time comes when the governments decide that it is in their best interest to disclose them. But the situation is difficult and it is impossible to defend a case that involves political motives, regardless of what these are. In the absence of an unexpected, fundamental issue that cannot be ignored, I think that the result will remain the continuation of a new case of miscarriage of justice in Britain."

Translated by Lynn Maalouf