

Episode 1, season 3 (September 2021)

Interview with Maryam al-Hallak

Brigitte: Hello Maryam. I am happy to talk to you in the context of our podcast episode on justice for Syrians. You wrote a lot on the subject of the forcibly disappeared, like the article on Al-Jazeera, on the Day of the Missing. You wrote that waiting is difficult for people who have continued to wait for many years for their loved ones. How did you connect with this issue?

Maryam: Life for Syrian families who have detainees stops completely when one of their members is arrested, sometimes there's more than one person arrested from the same family. Of course, the detainee is a member of the family, so the family's life remains frozen while waiting. The child waits for his father to come back and the mother waits for her son or father, or the wife waits for her husband to come back. All things remain suspended until the detainee is released. Of course life goes on but with difficulty because everything is postponed until the detainee comes back, until they release him, until he returns. Waiting, as I said, is the station where the detainee's family stays. I mean, we consider that the detainee is the one who was arrested. He was actually arrested and we no longer know anything about him. But the whole family is entangled with these feelings, life, and everything else is in a limbo: waiting. I can say from my own personal experience life itself continues, but it is extremely difficult to stand still and wait, especially if the detainee, for example, is responsible for the family's livelihood. Or for example, if there is property or land or house that the family wants to sell in order to afford living or the such. All of these matters are never resolved unless the detainee is released.

Should I tell my story about my experience of waiting? Waiting began with the second arrest of Ayham. Of course, he had been detained for three months previously. The second arrest was on 5th November 2012. He was arrested at Damascus University. His friends told us that he was arrested at the university. We waited for three months. I wasn't always waiting at home, I was always looking for him. We kept looking for him for three months until a young prisoner was released. He was the one who documented everything that had happened, the torture, how he died in his company. So he told me that he died. We organized a mourning gathering according to traditions. At this stage, the waiting had stopped because the end was now revealed. But ten days later, different news reached us, by one of those who had been arrested. He was a distant relative who got out and told us that Ayham was still alive and that he spoke to him. So I entered a phase where I only wanted to know the truth and whether Ayham was alive or dead.

For seventeen months, that is a year and five months, I kept looking for him every day. I searched for him. Is he alive or dead? I didn't care if he was arrested or not. My concern was to find the truth, however possible. I tried with the highest authorities but to no avail. The daily waiting continued for seventeen months, until they gave me his death certificate. A death certificate which states he died five days after his arrest. All this search was in vain, all this waiting was in vain. I took the certificate but there was no certainty, I didn't receive his body, I didn't know how he died. I didn't know anything about him. After about six months, I tried to see where his belongings were

buried. I was able to obtain a paper from the military judiciary saying that he died in one of the security branches and that his body number was three hundred and twenty. This was on the same date that was mentioned five days after the arrest. Also, like I said, the security officers followed us and we left the house where we had sought refuge, so we fled to Lebanon.

In Lebanon the waiting continued, there was still hope because I had not seen him, I had not buried him, I had not seen his body, so I remained hopeful until then, even if the hope was just a chance of five in one million. Until the Caesar's photos appeared. His picture was clear, he died five days after arrest. It's clear. This means our waiting ended. Yet, this waiting lasted two years from the day he was arrested, during which I searched and waited on a daily basis. Of course, we've been subjected to extortion. People take advantage of your desire to know the truth. This was very difficult because they would come to tell you that they know something in exchange for money. The situation was very difficult. I don't know what to say. I hope that waiting will stop for all the families and the detainees will be set free, *insha'allah*, and they will all return to their families alive.

Brigitte: Today, you are active as a human rights activist, and you are also a member of the Caesar family. How do you do this? Where do you get this strength and energy? This is firstly. And secondly, as a member of this organization, what is your most important goal?

Maryam: I think the motive behind the fact that I have been continuing my work since the day I fled Damascus, is that while searching for the truth, every day I met about fifty or sixty mothers, wives and fathers, and we were looking for our children together. I once tried to convince them to make a statement, to take a stand together, write something, and say that we want our children, but the fear that was planted in mothers' eyes was terrifying, saying: "No, we can't do anything". If a son has gone, let the second son live. If the husband has been taken, let the children stay. If the children were arrested, let the family survive. There was this fear because in Syria they can arrest the whole family without a reason or any apparent conviction. This fear was terrifying. When I arrived in Beirut, I immediately contacted Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Red Cross. I felt I was carrying the message of these mothers whose voices were muffled. They couldn't talk but I was able to talk, to tell the story of Ayham. Ayham is a precious young man like any other Syrian youth. No child is more precious than another, I mean, my son is dear to me, in the same way that other young men are dear to their mothers.

By telling the story of Ayham I managed to make the suffering of families known and their voices heard, and tell the stories of torture and death happening in Syria's prisons. This was the biggest motivation for me. I filed a lawsuit against the heads of the security branches in Berlin when I was still in Beirut then I came to Germany at the invitation of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights regarding the lawsuit as a plaintiff and witness. I sought asylum in Germany. I met a number of families who also found photos of their children, brothers, or other family members among the Caesar photographs. At the Syrian Media Center for Freedom of Expression, Mazen Darwish, suggested that we join forces, so we were among the founders, with five families. We formed the Caesar Families Association, which consists now of fifty families. Our most important goal is to hold accountable those who killed our children or relatives. We lost the hope that our children will return but

we just hope that perpetrators will be held accountable. Also, of course, one of the most important goals of the association is to take care of the family as a whole. Currently, we provide psychological support. The association doesn't provide financial support. It just provides psychological support, through a second organization. We sympathize with one another because we all have the same concern. For example, I lost my son, there's a girl who lost her brother, another her husband. We sympathize with one another and we work together because we share the same concern.

Currently, besides the Caesar Families Association, we formed a group called the Charter Group with four organizations, when we were in Brussels in 2019 because we used to go to meetings with European Union ministers, ambassadors etc. They hear our stories and sympathize. For example, my son died in detention, a man spent three years and a half in prison, a girl lost her brother etc. They listen, they are affected and sometimes tears roll down their cheeks. Then we thought we are not here to make people sad, this is not our role. We don't want this. Our role is to make them do their duty as an international community, to help us in this situation. We formed a coalition under the name of Charter for Justice and Truth, to retain the independence of each association that works on its own. The Charter was established on 10th February 2021. Afterwards, we raised the issue of working on a mechanism. We, the Caesar Families Association, are interested in the mechanism, which would allow international entities approved by the Security Council, the European Union or the General Assembly to enter Syria because the Syrian regime prevents any organization from entering Syria. They need to focus only on revealing the fate of the missing. We don't want to determine who the perpetrators are. We don't want to hold anyone accountable, but we just want to know the fate of those who have been missing for ten years, what happened to them, who is alive and who is dead. The idea of revealing, and the mechanism itself would be humanitarian. Of course, we won't forget that we want to hold the perpetrators accountable and we won't forget that we're asking for compensation, whether moral or material, for the families, for all Syrian families who lost their possessions and children. But we are doing this for humane and humanitarian reasons, only to check on those missing or imprisoned for the families.

Brigitte: Did you change your view on the issue of accountability and justice since the establishment of the Charter a year or less than a year, since February? What is accountability in your opinion at the moment in the Syrian context?

Maryam: As for accountability, it is like what they say, there is a big goal we want to achieve. As you said, there are many steps, many ways to achieve justice. And justice is a big issue, there is no absolute justice. Of course, justice must have its rules. I certainly haven't changed my opinion on the issue of justice, which I always demand. But the mechanism that we are asking for is - what the Charter states in the statement - that we want two types of justice: short-term justice and long-term justice. Short-term justice is to reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared detainees. The mechanism is the first part of the Charter. Meaning, the mechanism that we are asking for is the first section of the Charter, which is to reveal the fate of the detainees. Once we are reassured about their fate, accountability will follow suit.

And, of course, European countries, I mean, some European countries, are thankfully holding court cases and perpetrators are being held accountable. But this is not the only thing we want. We aspire that there will be courts in Syria and that they really hold the heads of the regime accountable. Anyone who caused or was responsible for the

death of one of the detainees, or a death in any case, if it was by air strikes, if it was by bombing ... that led to the death of Syrians, must be held accountable. But this is, like what we said, a very long way. As for me, if we say we want Bashar al-Assad to be in the International Criminal Court, we are fully aware that as long as there is the Russian veto, this won't happen. Therefore, we demand, and I personally always demand, that we want a special International Court for Syria. This is the only way that ensures that perpetrators can be held accountable in the long run. Sure, as we see, dictators can be held accountable after twenty or thirty years, or even fifty years. I will possibly not witness it during my life, I am old, but surely my children and grandchildren will do. This is my wish, and *insha'allah* they will follow up and see the results of the efforts we have undertaken.

Brigitte: How can the issue of missing persons and forcibly disappeared persons, and victims more broadly, become more clear to ordinary people in Europe?

Maryam: Ok. You may have an idea about the Syrian regime, it's brutal. As we say: it suppresses our breath. There's a saying in Syria that walls have ears, so we are always silent. There is fear. Fear to tell your story. Even as we live in Europe there are many families who are afraid to tell their stories because so far some of their members are in Syria, and we know that the regime can arrest anyone arbitrarily without any justification. The first thing we need to get rid of is this fear. We need to erase this fear from the hearts of people, especially those outside Syria. Everyone must tell their stories. All the people should tell their stories, all the victims, and all the survivors must tell their stories to the whole world so that they can make a kind of narrative, a Syrian narrative to the whole world, so that the world works to reach the decisionmakers, which is a kind of pressure on them, in addition to, of course, the work of civil society organizations whose role is to take the stories and also work on them. Of course, there is the issue of documentation, I think European countries or America documented what happened. Because documentation, I believe, tells what happened in Syria. Of course, documentation happened as a result of media and technological development, everything that happens is documented, shared and preserved. We should make the world, - especially European people, for example, since a greater number of Syrian refugees are in Europe -, we should change the European view on us. I mean, we are not here to eat and drink, we are not hungry, we ran away from injustice, we escaped persecution and fear. When they understand and feel this, they will definitely stand with us in front of their governments, and governments will form an opinion. They will have an opinion and a voice, for example, in the European Union or the Security Council, to support the Syrian people, the stories of the Syrian people, detainees and forcibly disappeared persons. This is because there is no single family in Syria, I think for about ten years or more, that doesn't have a detainee. From all sides, there are detainees and forcibly disappeared persons, that no one knows anything about.