



Middle East Forum
FOR POLICIES AND FUTURE STUDIES

Detention of Women

**during Syrian Revolution
Instrumentalized by the Regime**

By Yasmina Benshi

9/7/2020





Middle East Forum
FOR POLICIES AND FUTURE STUDIES

Middle East Forum For Policies and Future Studies

The Middle Forum for Policies and Future Studies supports pluralistic approach to future studies and promotes human rights sensitive policies and works on advising stakeholders on a strategic level all over the Middle East region. It is composed of Arab and International political, diplomatic and academic figures who want to become a leading center in the area of future studies at regional and international level and to institutionalize prospective thinking in decision making, priority setting, peace building, good governance, planning, as well as research and development.

www.policiesforum.me

info@policiesforum.me

 +0908508403999

  MEPoliciesforum

The Middle East Forum considers that the information and opinions contained in the studies and research are expressive of the opinions of its authors and do not express the opinion of the Forum. Accordingly, the researcher bears full legal responsibility for the content he publishes.



Yasmina Benshi

A Syrian journalist and researcher specializing in the file of detainees in Syria.

A human rights activist.



Middle East Forum
FOR POLICIES AND FUTURE STUDIES

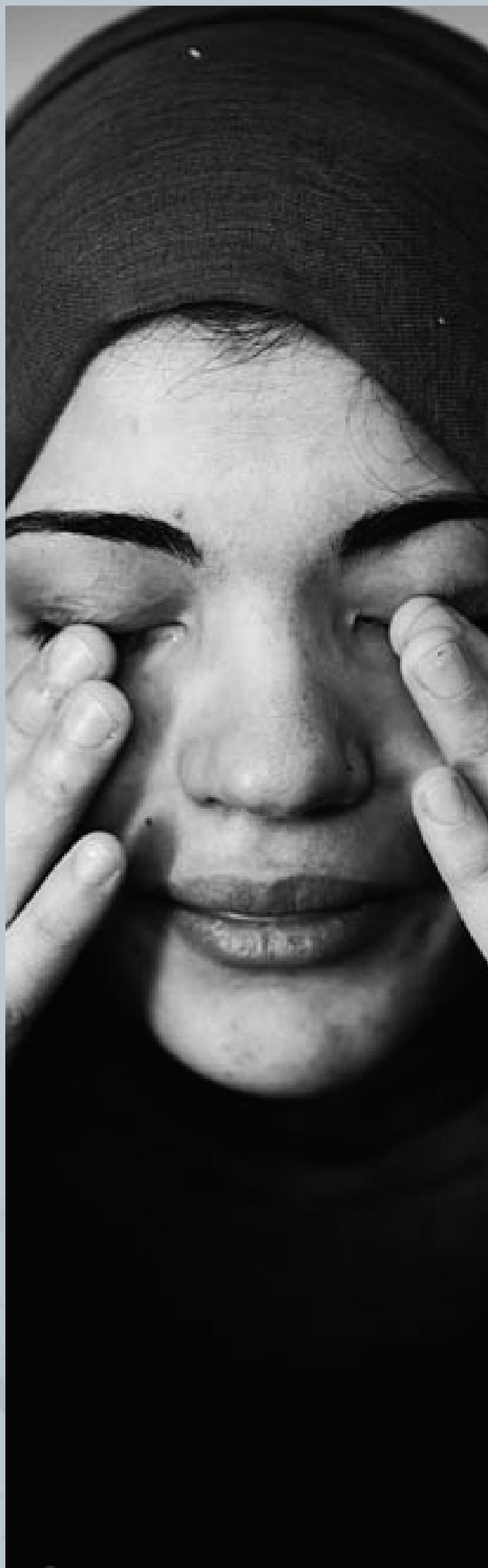
With the onset of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the Syrian regime adopted a policy of arbitrary arrests and detention of Syrians in general and systematic arrests of women in particular to curb the movement that was calling for freedom and the overthrow of the regime, as the latter was pursuing a strategy aimed at silencing opponents who were criticizing the ruling authorities. In truth, women, in our conservative society often have too much privacy, with the fear of being subjected to physical or sexual abuse in prisons and detention centers.

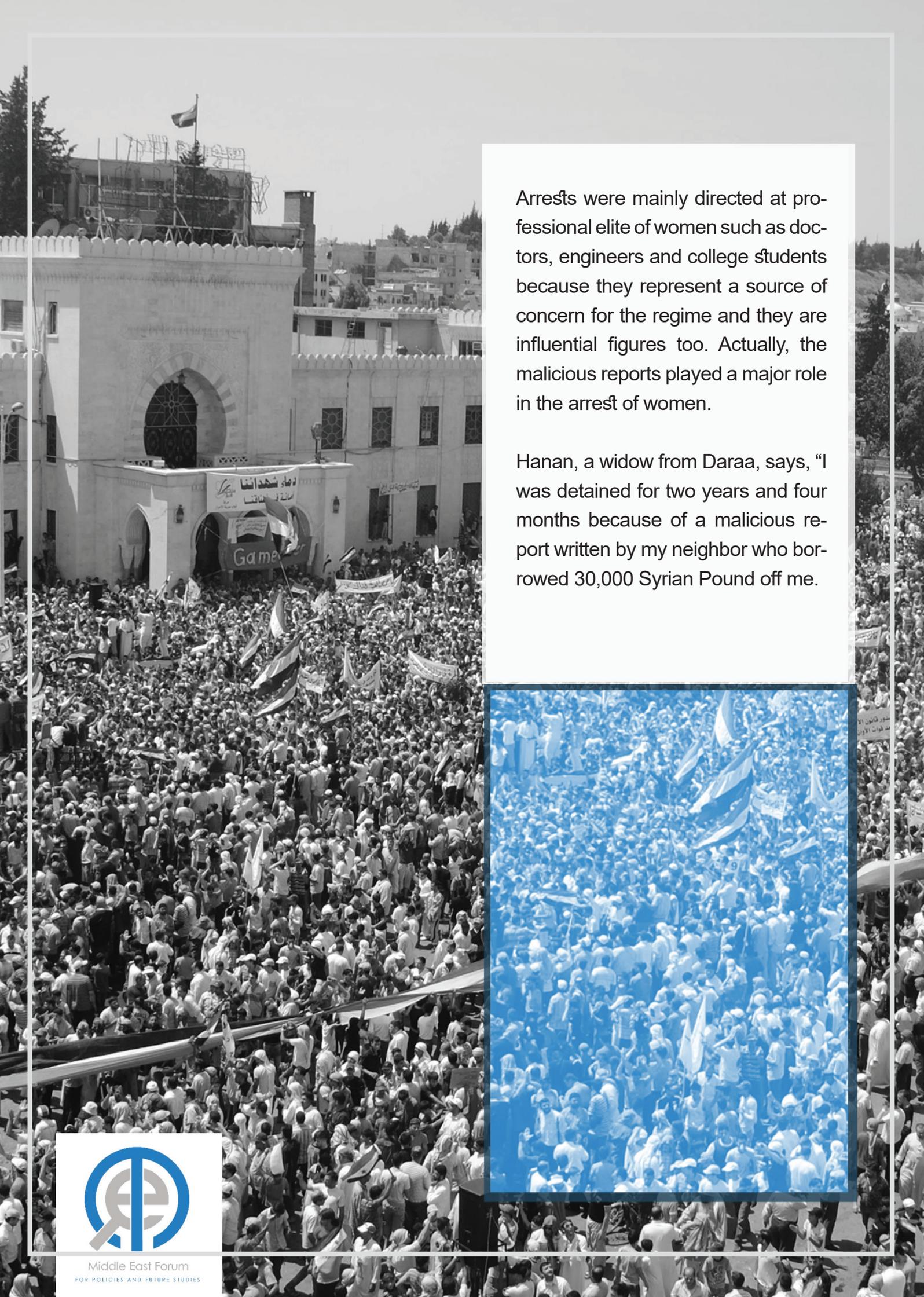


Large-scale arrests of women activists occurred during the revolutionary and civil movement, for their involvement in the peaceful demonstrations in order to exert pressures on the local communities and halt protests and any activity against the regime.

Arrests targeted activists' relatives (wives, daughters, or mothers) to force them to turn themselves in, and the Syrian government resorted to this practice to force opponents to stop their movements against the regime, but, however, in many of such cases, men surrendered themselves to the security services in exchange for the women's release, but unfortunately this was always met with treachery by the Syrian regime not only that women were not released but also men were tortured more severely, where most cases led to death in security branches and prisons.

Systematic arrests were carried out targeting women by the Syrian regime in some villages and regions that had seen revolutionary movements to impose its own agendas and plans on the local population, which aims to tighten the regime's grip on the people and to force the largest number of them to displace. Women were also arrested at security checkpoints because they belong to one of the cities, towns or villages those revolted against the regime.

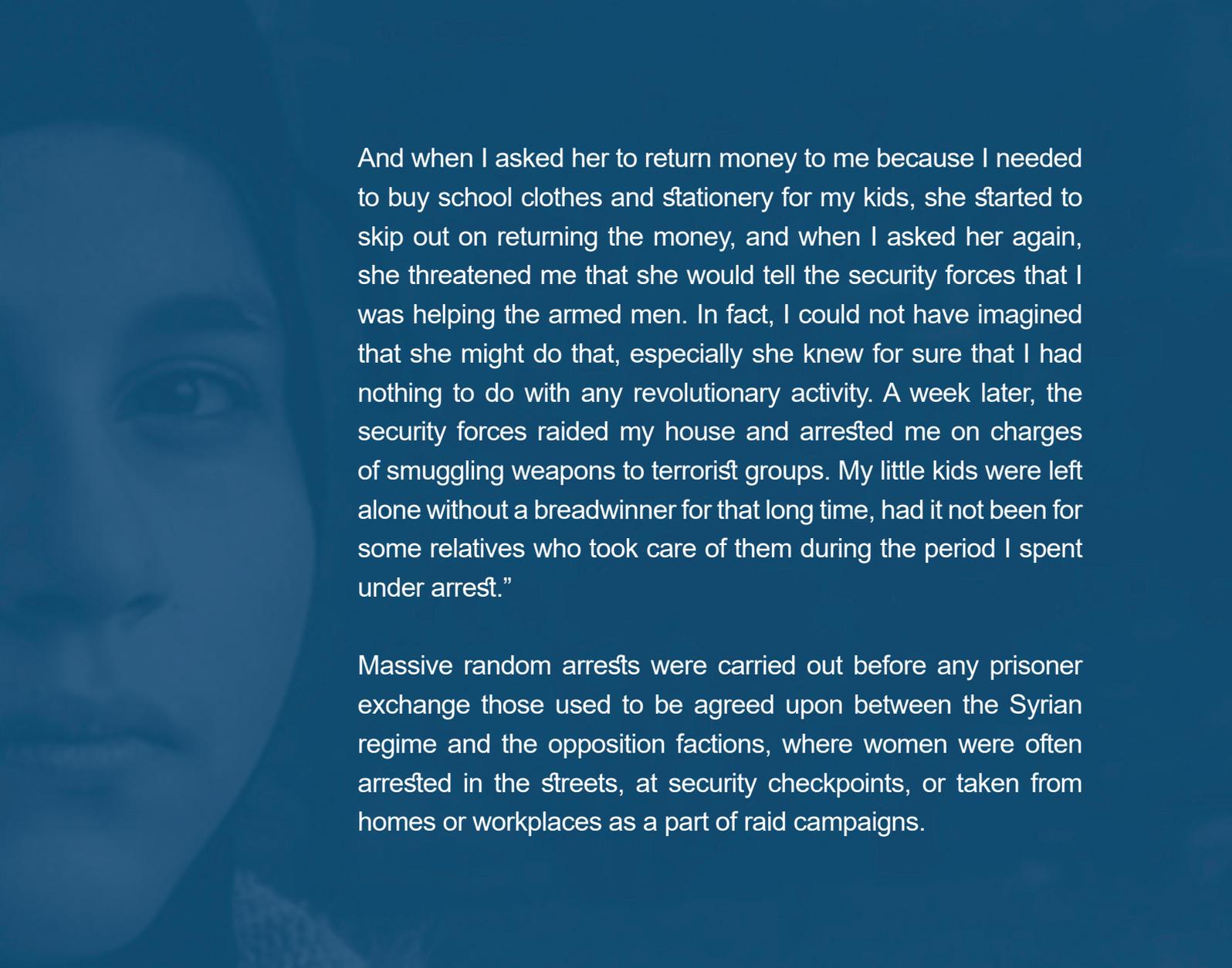




Arrests were mainly directed at professional elite of women such as doctors, engineers and college students because they represent a source of concern for the regime and they are influential figures too. Actually, the malicious reports played a major role in the arrest of women.

Hanan, a widow from Daraa, says, “I was detained for two years and four months because of a malicious report written by my neighbor who borrowed 30,000 Syrian Pound off me.





And when I asked her to return money to me because I needed to buy school clothes and stationery for my kids, she started to skip out on returning the money, and when I asked her again, she threatened me that she would tell the security forces that I was helping the armed men. In fact, I could not have imagined that she might do that, especially she knew for sure that I had nothing to do with any revolutionary activity. A week later, the security forces raided my house and arrested me on charges of smuggling weapons to terrorist groups. My little kids were left alone without a breadwinner for that long time, had it not been for some relatives who took care of them during the period I spent under arrest.”

Massive random arrests were carried out before any prisoner exchange those used to be agreed upon between the Syrian regime and the opposition factions, where women were often arrested in the streets, at security checkpoints, or taken from homes or workplaces as a part of raid campaigns.





The exchange deals also encouraged the Syrian regime and other factions to increase arrests for these deals, as the various parties, especially the Syrian regime, resorted to systematically detaining women to use them as leverages or bargaining chips.

Hanadi, a women inmate was released from the Syrian regime's prisons under a prisoner exchange, says, "I was detained and held in Adra Central Prison in Damascus at the beginning of 2014, when a group of women were transferred from other branches, numbers began to increase and the detention centers began to be crowded until the 10th of March 2014, then an exchange was announced to be held between the Syrian regime and one of the Islamic factions that had kidnapped the nuns of Maaloula to exchange some of the detainees of women, at that time we knew that these major arrests came as a result of the announcement of a near swap."

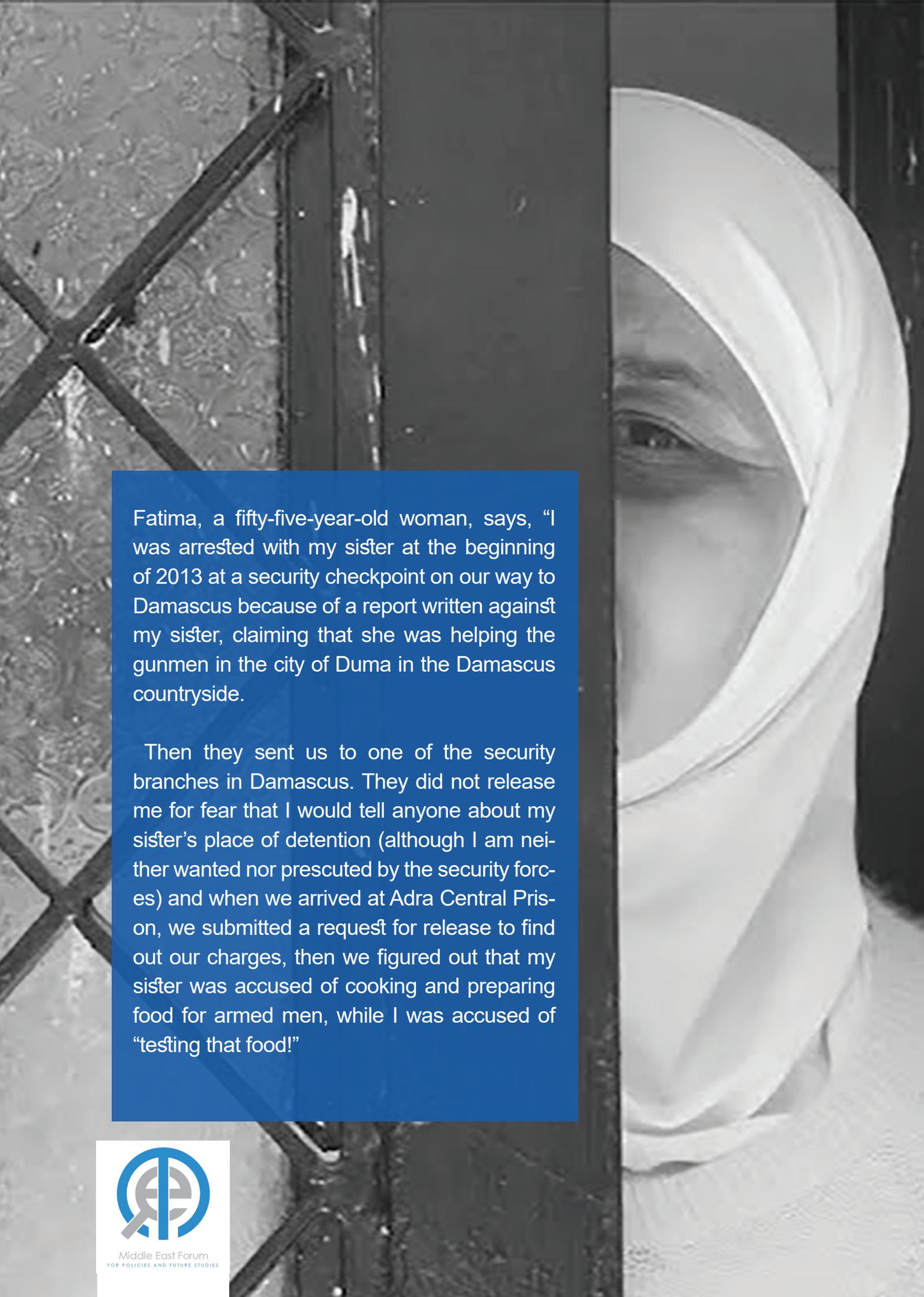


The charges against the women detainees varied, and the Syrian regime has invented accusations that we have never ever heard of. Some of the detainees had been accused of serious charges that led to transfer them to military field courts, but the largest number of them are transferred to the (Terrorism Court), which was formed according to Presidential Decree No. 22 in 2012, instead of the Supreme State Security Court. As a matter of fact, there were rare cases in which female detainees are transferred to the military court.

Inside Adra Central Prison, to which detainees are transferred from all security branches of Syrian cities, women detainees are allowed to submit a request for release using a sheet that should be purchased by a prison warder, in order to get the accusations against them and the type of court to which they would be subject, where many women inmates got shocked because of the accusations leveled against them, about which they have never heard throughout their life, such as (marriage jihad, weakening the power of the nation, forming a gang of villains, enticement...)

Charges against women





Fatima, a fifty-five-year-old woman, says, “I was arrested with my sister at the beginning of 2013 at a security checkpoint on our way to Damascus because of a report written against my sister, claiming that she was helping the gunmen in the city of Duma in the Damascus countryside.

Then they sent us to one of the security branches in Damascus. They did not release me for fear that I would tell anyone about my sister’s place of detention (although I am neither wanted nor persecuted by the security forces) and when we arrived at Adra Central Prison, we submitted a request for release to find out our charges, then we figured out that my sister was accused of cooking and preparing food for armed men, while I was accused of “testing that food!”





The period of detention in security branches & prisons

The arrest journey for women detainees begins in one of the security branches in the city or in the governorate in which they were arrested. Either they are released from the branch directly, or they are transferred to another security branch in Damascus (the main branch) and from there they are moved to Adra Central Prison.

The period of detention inside the security branches usually ranges from one day to two months (the legal period of detention inside the branches) without exceeding that period, except in exceptional cases, especially when the security officer decides that the female detainee has important information for them or that she may pose security risks, in such cases the detainee might stay for a period of up to a year or more.



Defamation women detainees

The Syrian regime uses the method of defamation and social stigmatization to harm the reputation of the detainees of women in general and the influential female activists in particular, in order to distract the people from the violations it is carrying out. This kind of practice affects the women who would be released, as they would not be able to continue their life normally after leaving the prison, because the traditional conservative society we live in is usually concentrating on women's issues and their reputation than any other matters.

After her release, Hind , who is from the city of al-Hasakah, tells her own story about the way the regime made up lies of how she was committing immoral acts with the armed men in order to defame the woman. "When I was released from Adra Central Prison in Damascus, I went to the nearest residential area to make a call phone to talk to my family, and ask them to send a taxi for me from our area to take me back to our home. But my father asked me during the phone call to stay in Damascus and that they would come to me, after my father and mother came to Damascus, they asked me to stay with a friend in Damascus until I can travel to Turkey!" said Hind.

"At my urging, my mother told me why they did not want me to return back to our home. She said that some of the security forces in our area had spread gossip that my arrest was due to sexual relations with the armed men, and that my father since then had not been able to talk with our relatives or friends because of the fabricated terrible rumors about his own daughter and the social stigma he has had."





Keeping some female detainees for years or transferring them to unknown places

The Syrian regime deliberately keeps some female detainees held for a long period, especially those female activists whom many people, groups and forums are intensively calling for releasing them, or others are from the families of some prominent politicians and activists in order to be bargaining chips in major prisoner exchanges or negotiations, and many female detainees were transferred to unknown places, feared to be Sednaya Military Prison.

Tal Al-Malouhi is a young Syrian woman from Homs. She has been in prison since she was seventeen years old. She is one of the prisoners those spent the almost longest period in the regime's detention centers. She was arrested at the beginning of 2010, at time she had not yet reached the legal age, then a five-year sentence was issued against her in 2011 when she turned eighteen, and the Syrian regime still keeps her in its prisons to this day, despite the termination of serving the sentence in February 2015.

Legal and security problems experienced by women who survive prison

Travel ban and court hearings follow-up:

After their release from detention, many women are prevented from leaving the country after restricting their movement. Many women were freed from detention, have to follow-up hearings in the terrorism court by a decision of the judge. This also means that at any time a sentence might be issued against them and they can be arrested again, so they are forced to leave the country illegally, out of concern for their unsafe security situation and for fear of returning to prison again.

Nour tells us about her arduous journey after three days of being released from prison at the end of 2015. “I was under house arrest in my city of Damascus to follow up court hearings on charges of financing terrorism and committing terrorist acts. Then my family asked me to leave the country immediately through smuggling routes towards the countryside of Idlib in an arduous journey that resumed for more than sixteen hours, passing through several security checkpoints. I finally arrived in the area safe and sound, and from there I headed to Turkey to settle there. After two years of court sessions that I was absent from, I was sentenced in absentia by the Terrorism Court to fifteen years in prison.”



Fear of prosecution:

Release a detained woman does not necessary mean that she has become safe from arrest, as many persons have been arrested again after they were released as a result of being wanted by other branches else.

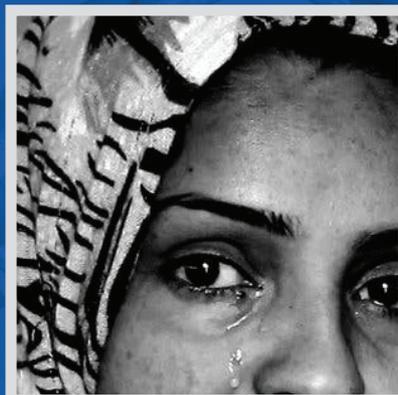
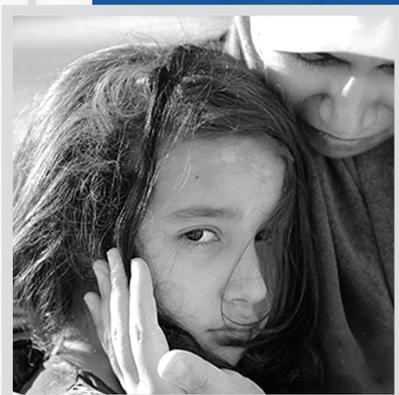
As for those who went out in exchange deals, they are more likely to be arrested directly, given that the Syrian regime believes that it was wronged in most of the deals it concluded with the opposition factions. So after releasing them, it returns to pursue those who have been released one by one.

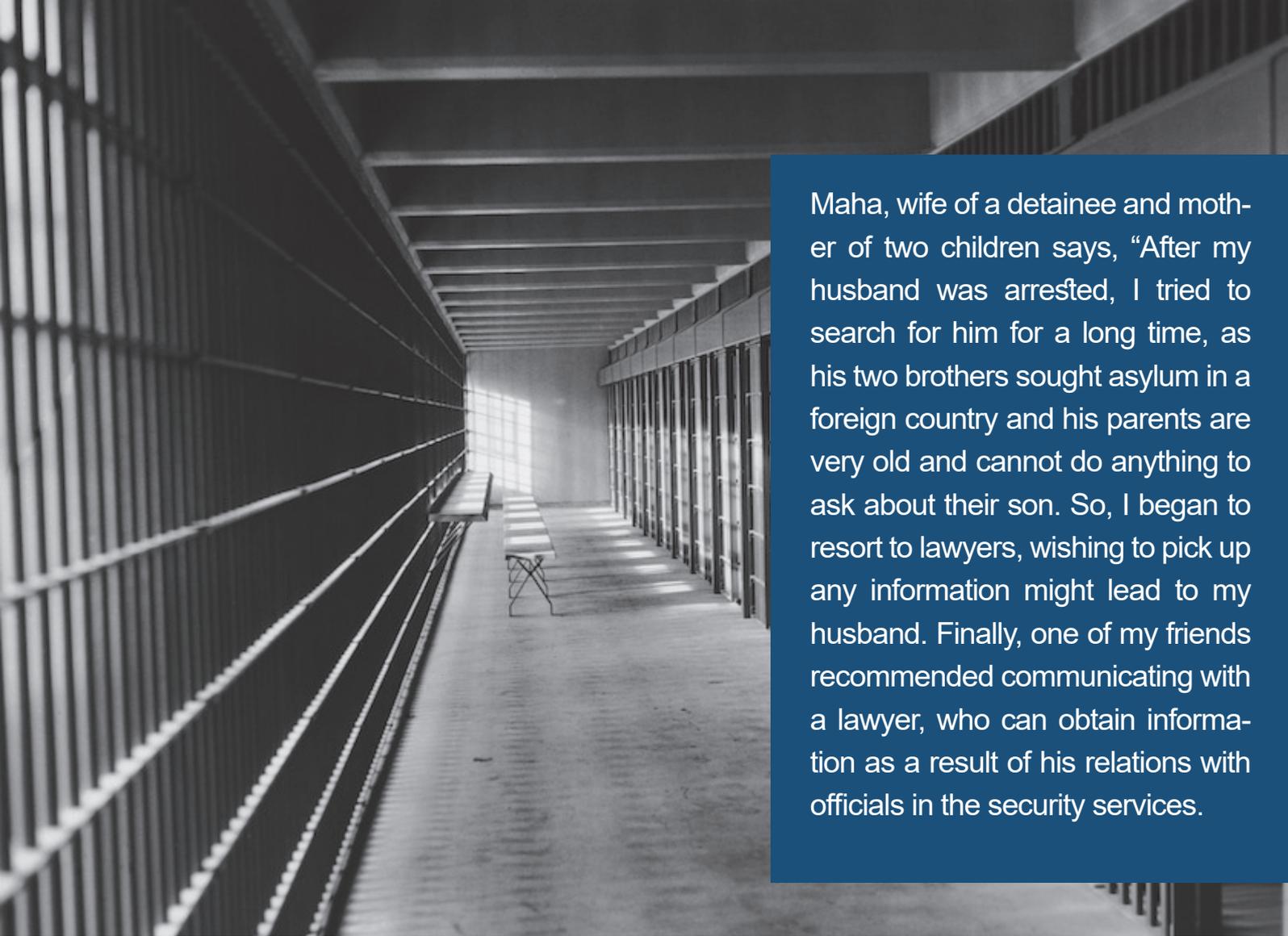
Ayat from Homs, who was detained with her sister, narrates, “After I left the prison with my sister in one of the exchange deals, we returned to our family home in Homs to settle there, and after three months, my sister decided to travel to Damascus to visit our relatives despite my warning and fear for her and at one of the security checkpoints in the road links Homs to Damascus, she was arrested on charges of promoting terrorism, and to this day she is still detained inside Adra Central Prison in Damascus.



The legal and social problems been experienced by the wives of detainees and forcibly disappeared

Not only women survived prisons suffered from security and legal problems, but also wives of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons had a large part of these difficulties, as many of them were subjected to security prosecution and arrest while questioning their husbands in detention centers and security branches. Besides, they were also subjected to financial and sexual extortion by some security agents and brokers, when asked about their husbands and their places of detention, as large sums of money were often required from the wives in exchange for any piece of information about the detainees or forcibly disappeared husbands. Often such information was false and its purpose was extortion only.





Maha, wife of a detainee and mother of two children says, “After my husband was arrested, I tried to search for him for a long time, as his two brothers sought asylum in a foreign country and his parents are very old and cannot do anything to ask about their son. So, I began to resort to lawyers, wishing to pick up any information might lead to my husband. Finally, one of my friends recommended communicating with a lawyer, who can obtain information as a result of his relations with officials in the security services.

As soon as I met that person in his office, that I did not understand the nature of his work, he asked for paying a sum of money in exchange for knowing my husband fate only, whether he was alive or dead, which forced me to sell the last piece of gold I owned. Indeed, this man told me that my husband is being held in the Mezzeh prison of the Air Force Intelligence and that I had to pay \$100,000 in order to get my husband out of prison, but unfortunately - in truth luckily - I was not able to secure such an astronomical sum amount. I left the country with my children for fear of being arrested, only to discover after six months that my husband had died under torture two years earlier.”

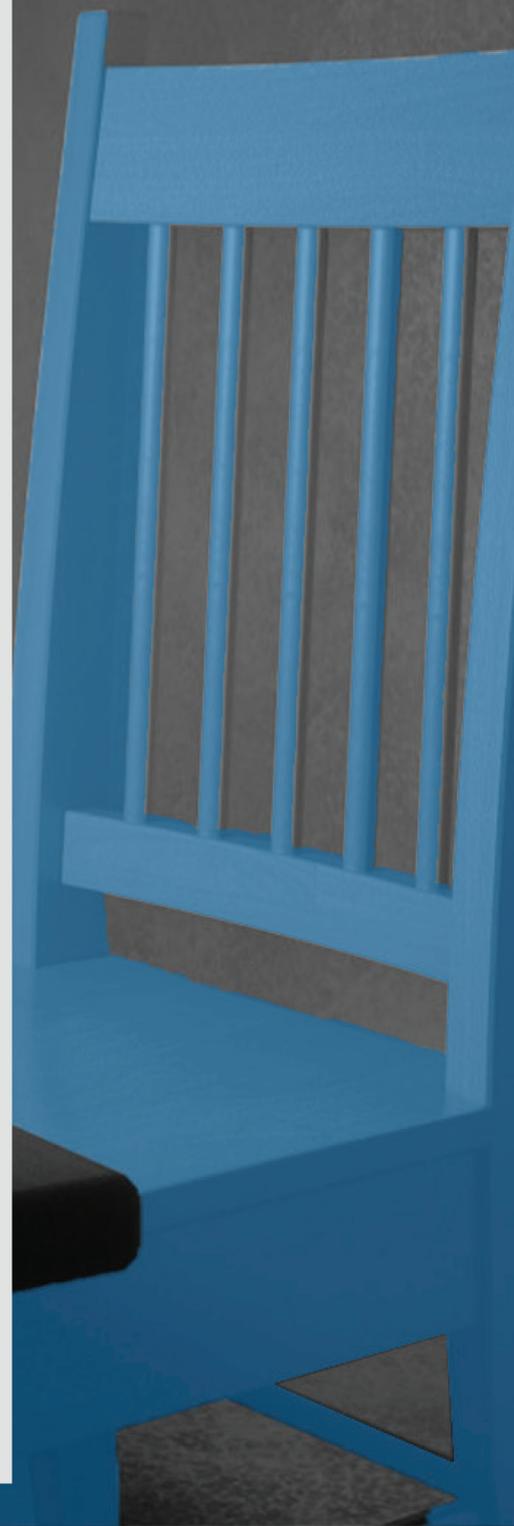
Problems are compounded still further for the wives of detainees and forcibly disappeared, as the Syrian Personal Status Law provides for the guardianship rights of the father over his children, including exercising his disciplinary powers over them,



providing them with medical care, education, approval of their marriage and other matters related to the care of minors. As for the role of the mother, it is limited to custody, allowing her only to meet the basic needs of her children, and accordingly, in the absence or disappearance of the father, the mother does not have the legal right to guardianship over her children, which would lead to many problems, especially between her and the husband's family.

Seizure of movable and immovable assets for detainees by the Syrian regime, which means that both wives and children can not benefit from the detainee's funds. Not only that, but also the mother with her kids have to leave the seized property, which leads to a serious crisis that affects the entire family, and the wife will find herself forced to find a job to support her family, and this work may not be commensurate with her educational level, social status or physiological nature. In addition, under such circumstances the wife will be responsible for the care of young children in most cases. This is exactly what happens to the family of the forcibly disappeared persons, where the wife or any family member cannot benefit from the property of the disappeared until his fate is revealed or he reaches the age of seventy years according to Syrian law, which means a lot of economic hardships for the wife and family as a whole.

The members of these families are also subjected to social stigmatization, especially women who often become ostracized from society after the disappearance of their husbands because they are often accused of committing sins, or because people are worrying about having ties with the family of a person who was arrested or forcibly disappeared.





As for the families that internally displaced or sought refuge in neighboring countries, their biggest problems were their inability to obtain a father's approval paper regarding the children's travel or to enroll in schools. As some wives were afraid to declare that their husbands were detained for fear of bullying against their children in the areas of displacement throughout Syria, which forced some women to get death certificates for their husbands without being sure about that in order to get rid of those difficulties that are hindering some of the necessary procedures in life. In general, this means other legal problems if the husband leaves alive from detention or returns after his death certificate was issued in civil records, which leads to a big problem.

In conclusion, after what has been documented and mentioned, we find that there is a clear approach has been traced by the Syrian regime and a tactic to pressure the society as a whole with regard to women's issues in the period of the Syrian revolution representing in arbitrary arrests against women that negatively affected their life and stability as a result of the circumstances that forced them to leave the country or the arrests of men that caused serious problems for their relatives and their families at all levels, especially women and children, as these problems caused the displacement of many families in Syria.

The regime deliberately is trying so hard to keep people confused while thinking about domestic affairs relating to life hardships, social and legal issues that would prevent communities from thinking in essential matters, which specifically made the Syrian people to rise up, in order to gain freedom and to topple such a regime. Consequently, such practices made the society fragmented, divided, immersed in the problems of coping with abject poverty and hunger and constrained by several restrictions by the Syrian regime itself.

In addition, the testimonies and cases of violations documented by local and international organizations and the issued reports confirm the Syrian regime's involvement in committing systematic crimes against humanity and war crimes. The photos leaked by the dissident from the regime (Caesar) are the biggest witness in this era to the size of the violations carried out by the Syrian regime against the Syrians throughout the years of the revolution.

The Syrian prisons and detention centers are still overcrowded with thousands of female detainees, some of whom have unknown fates and those who have been transferred from detention centers to unknown destinations, and the suffering of survivors and wives of detainees and forcibly disappeared continues to this day.

It is reported that the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the arrest of more than 8038 women been held inside the prisons of the Syrian regime until the end of 2019, and documented more than 118000 between detainees and forcibly missing persons, and this confirms that thousands of families are still suffering due to loss of their relatives.

(This study has been prepared after live interviews with 20 women survived the security branches and Syrian regime's prisons. Wives of detainees and forcibly disappeared people who had passed severely harsh security, legal and social experiences while they were in Syrian government-controlled areas).

