

Syrian family feels heat of sectarian strife
By Basma Atassi, Al Jazeera
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Reyhanli, Turkey - When Mazen Fawwaz was killed last year in a battle against Syrian government forces in Idlib province, he left behind a 28-year-old wife and two young daughters.

Months later, his girls still sometimes cry "baba" into the sky from the window of their rented apartment in Reyhanli, the Turkish border town where the family fled in the aftermath of Fawwaz' defection to the rebel cause.



Shaza Fawwaz was widowed after her husband Mazen defected from the Syrian army (Basma Atassi/Al Jazeera)

Yet, the plight of the Fawwaz family, Shia Muslims from northern Syria, is more than the loss of a beloved husband and father. Their story underscores the deep sectarian scars left by the Syrian conflict, and the heavy price some families are forced to pay.

Since the start of the uprising, the majority of the Shia community - making up about three percent of Syria's population - has sided with the regime.

This has led to street-level perception that all Shias are supporters President Bashar al-Assad, himself a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam.

Making matter worse, opposition fighters - mainly Sunni Muslims - claim that Shias from Iran, Lebanon and inside Syria have been fighting on the side of the government. As evidence, some point to fighters wearing green bands, a Shia symbol, around their heads.

Fawwaz, an ex-army engineer, did have a green band around his head while fighting. He, however, was battling on the side of the opposition. His wife said he wore it in the spirit of Imam Hussain, an important figure in the history of Islam, who died in battle in 680 AD.

"When I watched footage showing the revolutionaries pulling the body of Martyr Mazen [Fawwaz], I saw the green band," said his widow Shaza. "For Shia Muslims, the green band means support for Imam Hussain.

"I am sure from the bottom of my heart that my husband was only fighting for Imam Hussain, who called for supporting righteousness."

Anniversary gift

Fawwaz worked as a communications engineer at the Assad Military Academy in Aleppo before he fled to Turkey and announced his defection from the Syrian regime in a YouTube video in July last year.

"It was [on] our wedding anniversary. He told me 'I dedicate this video to you,'" Shaza said, sobbing.

It was a highly public case. Following the appearance of the defection video on the Internet, regime-sponsored al-Dunia TV aired interviews with Fawwaz' brothers and mother.

In the interviews, family members said he was kidnapped by "armed terrorist groups" who forced him to make the video, and that it was impossible for him to even consider defecting.

Shaza, however, insisted his family knew exactly what Fawwaz thought of the regime. She said the family had to lie on camera to vindicate its name, especially because two of his brothers were officers in the Syrian army.

"Their friends and neighbours started accusing them of being traitors because they had a defecting family member," Shaza said.

As sectarian fault-lines have sharpened, many Shias fear reprisal by the Sunni-dominated opposition should the regime lose control of Shia villages.

Hussain, Shaza's 24-year-old brother, is scared of being abducted or harassed at opposition-manned checkpoints. He never uses his own ID, where his name indicates he is a Shia, when he leaves his hometown.

"We are at risk from both sides," Hussain said.

"Revolutionaries are suspicious of Shias, and Shias who were once my friends have turned into Shabiha [armed regime supporters]. Imagine having friends for more than 10 years who would suddenly start attacking you and threatening you."

Dangerous escape

Fawwaz and Shaza are from the town of Fouah, a Shia community of about 25,000 people, in northern Idlib province.

Fouah is surrounded by swathes of land controlled by rebel fighters, but the town itself is in the grip of Assad's forces and has become a military base used to shell nearby towns.

Shaza said her husband witnessed the military crackdown on the opposition in Aleppo, where army operations were directed from the academy where he worked.

She said the academy's staff became divided between Sunnis, who supported the uprising, and members of Assad's Alawite sect, which largely remained loyal to the president.

"My husband stood with the Sunnis," Shaza said. "They were a group of six friends. They started disappearing one by one. Nobody knew where they were going."

To Fawwaz' surprise, Shaza said he found the same friends months later in Turkey. It turned out they had also defected, but were too scared at the time to tell each other about their plans.

The Fawwaz family arrived in Reyhanli after a dangerous escape. They raced through farmlands and olive orchards, all their belongings in hand, in order to sneak across the border illegally.

Soon after their arrival, Fawwaz started looking for rebels who could help him join the ranks of the armed opposition in Syria.

Eventually, he met Lieutenant Salem Habboush from Idlib Martyrs Battalions.

"My husband was eager to be in the battlefield," Shaza said. "I told him to be patient. Even Lieutenant Salem told him to wait. After all, he was an engineer, not a fighter, and did not have much fighting experience."

Branded a traitor

Idlib Martyrs Battalions launched an attack to seize the Syrian border town of Harem from Assad forces on September 2.

Fawwaz died along with his commander Habboush in an artillery barrage.

The two men were buried in the same grave.

A funeral was held for Fawwaz in the town of Binnish, near Fouah. None of his Shia family members in Syria attended.

His mother by this time had disowned him. One of his brothers threatened to kill Shaza, blaming her for the death of her husband.

Shaza cannot return to her hometown with her daughters unless the regime falls. Some among the Shia community in Fouah have branded her a traitor.

Even so, Shaza said she does not fear reprisals or revenge.

"Many Shias in the town did this to themselves. They had many opportunities to desert the criminal regime of Assad, but they did not take them and instead participated in oppressing and killing the people," she said.

"I know that if I get killed, people in my town will be happy. I won't be happy if they die, but I will say that [was] the path they chose for themselves."

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