

## We Are Here; Look at Us

*Syria was the country of safety and goodness  
and Syria opened its doors for everyone.*

*Syria was our loving mother and it hugged all of us.*

Before I married, I lived with my family in an old Arabian house in an area called Jobar. Our life was beautiful and we were close—we lived in a big house with my uncles and their wives. There were six of us children, three boys and three girls, along with several cousins. When I think of those days I feel happy; they were normal and spontaneous days without the war and its burden. You would feel the harmony and the love between us. We were happy.

I would play with my cousins—we'd stay up late at night and visit the neighbors, who worked in picking Mlokheya leaves (a plant that the leaves are picked, then chopped, then cooked) and we used to go to their house and help them. Our other neighbors had cherry trees in their garden and we used to visit them and eat cherries. These were beautiful days that I can never forget.

Later on I had some responsibility for my two younger brothers; my mother would go out and leave me responsible for them because I was the eldest daughter. I lived a little bit of motherhood in this way. I was 13 years old. My mother taught me how to cook and clean and take care of my brothers. I was happy doing it; I had the responsibility of the house but I never thought of it as work and I was happy.

I went to school but unfortunately I didn't complete my education. Back then I didn't feel the importance of education, and I didn't enjoy it. I wanted to work in a beauty shop because I liked cosmetics work a lot. I used to practice on my younger sisters by doing their hair. When I finished my elementary school (7th grade) I told my father that I wanted to leave school and work in a beauty shop. He agreed with me.

However, at that time the government wanted to build a highway in the area where our house was. This was a turning point to us; my father owned a piece of land in East Ghouta and we built a house there so we could move. This took us from the city to the countryside, and our old house was ruined to make room for the highway. Our life changed. My uncles each now had a house of their own, so we all lived separately.

There was another big difference: in the countryside there was a complication for women to act freely or go out of the house. I was 14 and I already had in mind that my father will allow me to work in a salon. There had been a salon near our old house and I wanted to work there but when we moved out of the city, there was not a salon in the whole area. Everything changed. It was not a familiar thing for women to work and if that happened people would talk. They were very conservative; women wore Niqab. Also it was a long distance to the nearest salon, so the idea was cancelled and I didn't continue with my education. I also couldn't develop my talent as a beautician.

My younger siblings grew up and I had a bigger role in helping my mother—if my mother went out I would look after my siblings. I had a strong relationship with my father; he treated us like we were his sisters. My father was my role model and he still is. He will stay my role model until my last day alive. I was closer to my father than my mother although

they say that girls are closer to their moms. I used to tell him when there was a boy I liked and he would give me advice: he would say that love doesn't buy bread and he would tell me about his experiences of falling in love. There is a punishment for girls who fall in love in Syria but my father was democratic. I used to tell him everything although he was very strict. He would listen to me. Now when I remember what I used to tell him I am surprised, I didn't tell my mother such things.

The second turning point in my life was that I got married. I was 16. It was 2002. I don't blame my parents for this but I do feel they were hasty about it. When my husband first asked me to marry him I refused him totally. But then I got engaged. Many men asked to marry me, but as we say, it's all about the fate.

My husband is related to my mother, her cousin. When my mother told me that they were coming to see me I rejected the idea of being married to him; I didn't want him. But my mother told me to consider that they were just coming to visit us and that I should see him first.

He was 31 years old, double my age. I sat with him and we talked and I felt some relief, but I still said that I didn't want to marry him. But then we talked. I went to the kitchen to do coffee and his sister followed me and asked if I liked him. I told her that I approve. My mother was shocked at this because I previously told her that I didn't approve of marrying him and I just told his sister the opposite. When my mother asked me what happened, I told her "I don't know but I feel relieved."

At that time I was not aware of the whole thing about marriage. I knew girls from the neighborhood who got engaged and they would tease me when we met. Maybe I just wanted to get engaged like them, I was immature. I

lived the stage of "My fiancé is coming, I need to do my hair, I want to get dressed."

This was 2002. Here is when the big problem happened. I was not fully aware of what was going on when I got married. My husband was the youngest in his family and had an older brother. I lived with my in-laws after I got married: the house was two bedrooms, one room for my mother in-law and the other room was mine.

After the marriage I became aware of a lot of things, like I married someone who is older than I am, and that I lived with my in-laws, and that I didn't live my childhood. I deprived myself from the right of living a childhood. In my family before marriage I held the responsibility of my siblings which was too early for me, and then with the husband and sisters in-law and my mother in-law, it was like I was beaten on my head and I woke up! I realized what I had just done to myself: my mother in-law was on a wheel chair, my sisters in-law used to visit us on a daily basis and guests would come every day—I didn't know if I was a bride or what!

My husband was old and he couldn't accept the idea that I was young. I lived my teenage days while married but he didn't accept that. He never thought that I was just a kid. He didn't understand me—whenever I did something he didn't like he would tell me "It's a shame, now you are married, you shouldn't be doing this," and every time he said those words to me I would go backwards. Instead of living full of happiness and stability with a husband, I felt the opposite.

I didn't feel like he contained me, like for example when I went out with him, I wanted to hold his hand. I wanted to feel loved but he disagreed with me on that; he would tell me "No, it's a shame to do this," but I thought he

is my husband, not my boyfriend!

I had the emotions but he didn't. Once he fought with me because he was sitting in the garden and I went to him and sat next to him and held his hand. He said "What if someone saw you, what would they say?!" I was not allowed to express my love or my emotions, and he didn't like it when I used to joke in the house. I got pregnant two months after my wedding, so all my emotions went to the baby.

I have two daughters and a son. Our life was very simple. My husband didn't have a fixed job, but we had food. I really felt that I grew up quickly. I managed the responsibility to be considerate of my husband's situation and to look after my children and feed them and help them with their studies. I really felt that I had a huge responsibility that I can't describe. I felt really old. If you see my children, you wouldn't guess that they are my children, you would think that my eldest daughter is my sister or my friend. I don't want my daughter to live what I lived – mine definitely was an early marriage. Girls shouldn't get married before 20.

My husband and I are in two different places. I try with him but I don't feel comfortable internally. I understand that now he is much older and I am still young, but he still wants to control me. He deprived me of visiting my family and pressured me a lot socially. I never thought of divorce, though, because our parents taught us that divorce is the last solution. There is an old saying that your grave is your house, but that is wrong. It is wrong not to tell your daughter that she can complain about her husband if something bad is happening, but I was scared to speak, I was scared of divorce.

My relationship with my children was very beautiful, I had something to

take care of and get distracted from my husband.

Then in 2011 the events started in Ghouta, a bit far from where we were. We started to hear sounds and we'd hear about the demonstrations. We started to feel afraid. Our neighborhood was raided all the time and there were many security forces there. We were so afraid that we would sleep with our clothes on to be prepared in case they raided our house at night. There was no safety anymore, we were so restricted.

**We'd hear the sounds and I would gather my children and stay in one corner of the house.** It is a feeling I cannot describe. Once they knocked on our door and my husband went out to talk to them and they were asking about someone. After that my husband told me that staying was difficult and the idea of travelling was in his head.

At that time I was pregnant with my third child. I delivered the baby in the beginning of the events. I was concerned for my children. When I heard the sounds of the bombings and shooting we'd wake up startled and we'd all start crying. I used to be so scared and worried about them but I didn't know what to do. I needed someone to calm me down. Once I was preparing eggplant pickles and I had to pressure it with weight so I put the gas can on top of it and when I went to sleep the gas can slipped and made a very loud sound. I remember that I was sleeping and I stood up and I don't know how but my husband stood in front of me and held me—I thought that a bomb was dropped on our house, and I was screaming at my husband, saying "The children!"

No one can imagine how it was for us! Any sound would scare us a lot. The area I loved in became a military zone. There was a bridge nearby that separated our area from Ghouta, and the military forces stationed on that

bridge. The problems escalated because if demonstrators were coming out of Ghouta the army would confront them and stop them, they would shoot them or arrest them. Snipers were on the roof tops of the nearby buildings. We were surrounded by snipers, the streets were full of tanks, and army forces were all around in our neighborhood.

I remember once we were on the roof and saw a demonstration coming and then we heard gun shots being fired at them, so we quickly ran downstairs into the house. My husband was scared of getting detained or that they would rape us, or of any of the children being harmed or affected. We thought of travelling and I was lost between agreeing to travel or disagreeing.

My mother was against me travelling, she told me to stay and that travelling was not the solution, she always said "If you leave your house, your value decreases" (Arabic proverb).

I was really lost so my husband suggested that we leave for two months, just until things settle down and then we'd return. We would leave for three months maximum, and then he would bring me back to Damascus. I agreed.

### **I lived through the events for one year.**

My husband stopped working and I stopped sending my children to school. I was scared all the time, scared of getting bombed or hit by random shooting. I was always scared for my children.

Fridays were holy days to Syrians, when many go out on trips and picnics. But after the war Fridays turned into a burden because demonstrations were held on Fridays and then bad things would happen. I started bringing

the children to my parent's house from Thursday until Saturday. It was very difficult for us. We reached a point where we were running out of our stored food. Some days we'd eat olives or something I had in the freezer, but in the end we had no meat or chicken or other types of food.

### **And I was pregnant.**

I remember once I wanted to cook but I had no ghee or oil to cook with. All I had were two potatoes. My children needed to eat.

We used to talk about what was going on but only inside the walls of the house because we couldn't talk about it outside. We asked ourselves why the president wasn't stopping what was happening and why he was allowing the bloodshed. In the beginning we supported Bashar, we were with him because he did nothing wrong. But after all the bloodshed, we started thinking that he could stop this. He could stop the destruction, and so the people who supported him ended up being against him.

Then my husband said "It's enough." His sister helped buy us plane tickets and we went to the airport. However when we reached the passport check-in we were rejected; we were not allowed to travel.

The regime didn't want anyone to travel, the first excuse was that we were late. So my sister in-law postponed the tickets for a later time. We went again—I went through the trouble of packing, but they told us again that we were not allowed to travel. My husband told them he needed to travel because he needed his sister's signature on inheritance papers, so they said he could travel alone, but the children and I could not. So we returned home and next we travelled by land, but when we reached the borders and they didn't allow us to pass. We returned home again.

**We tried once every three or four months in 2012. I packed luggage over and over.**

On the fourth try, he told his sister to send us an invitation letter and she did, and they told us the same thing—only he could go. That time I told my husband “I am sick of packing the luggage and that’s it.”

I felt that there is no hope for me to travel, but he told me we would try one last time and if didn’t work, we’d stay. That last time, I only took a few things. I remember when I was saying goodbye to my family I told them “I’ll be back, I’ll reach the borders and get rejected and I’ll come back.” I didn’t say a proper goodbye.

We reached the borders. There was a queue of people who wanted to pass ahead of us; some were crying and some were sitting on the floor, our car was the 7th in line. The driver went to talk to someone and they told him to take the car and drive it to a corner as if he was waiting for someone. We stayed there for a while until the man came and told the driver to get in, so we got in and we stamped the passports and it happened. We left.

It was as if I got shocked that now it’s real. Now we were on Jordanian land. My father called me to check up on us and I told him that passed through. I was scared and I didn’t know how I felt, and my father prayed for me and said he hoped that we’d return shortly. I was crying because I felt that now it is serious. I was crying the whole time.

What was the most difficult part about this journey was that I left my family. I also left my country, the country that I lived and grew up in. **My country’s breath made me live in it.**

So we came here and stayed with my sister in-law.

I still remember so many difficult situations back in Syria. For one, at the checkpoints, the regime didn’t respect if you were a woman or an old man. It was always a big relief for me to reach my parents’ house without being verbally abused or mistreated. They might say a bad word or flirt or something like that, and the man who is with you can’t say or do anything. They would do this in front of my husband, because if he said something, we wouldn’t know what they’d do to him. They carried weapons and they might shoot him!

And our neighbors were subject to violations; at 6 AM we were sleeping and I heard noise in the neighborhood. I felt that there is something not normal happening, so I opened the window and saw soldiers. They were holding one of my neighbors and his hands were tied behind his back and his eyes were blindfolded and they were dragging him and other soldiers are chasing after another one of my neighbors.

I was really scared, and the streets were full of soldiers. I don’t know if they were tipped or they were just in the neighborhood. I felt that danger is very close to us and that this could happen to my husband at any time. They took them and kept them for a while and beat them and then they released them.

Then after I got to Jordan I learned that my cousin had been shot and killed. I used to look after him—he was like a brother to me. I was very upset. They told me that he was sitting with his friends outside his house and a plane was shooting from above. This was in East Ghouta. He had nothing to do with anything, so the plane was shooting randomly. He was the only one who got shot. He was an only child. His name was Wa’el, may his soul rest in peace.

In Jordan, I was waiting for the days to pass so we could go home. But the problems increased in Syria and with it my fear for my family increased. A while after I got to Jordan, I heard about the chemical bombing in East Ghouta, when the chemical massacre took place. It was 2014. I tried to check that my family is safe and I couldn't call them because there was no network coverage. The chemical bombing was in an area called Zamalka and it was a bit far from where my parents lived, thank God they were not harmed.

They didn't witness it but they heard about the victims. My parents didn't leave the house because they didn't want to be around the gas. There were so many victims, may their souls rest in peace. Some people died in their sleep because the attack happened at night. My sister-in-law's husband died with most of his family members from that gas attack. 20 people from his family died.

**I got out of the war but the war stayed with me because I left a part of my soul there.**

My older brother lived with his wife in an area called Abaseya, a military area controlled by the regime. It is the separation area between East Ghouta and the regime. My brother rented a house and he wanted my parents to move in it because of the problems in Ghouta. So my parents decided to move—it had become difficult for them to find food and there was no electricity or water or basic needs. So my parents first sent my two younger brothers, the ones I raised. My parents told my younger brothers to leave ahead and that they would follow them later. So my brothers left and at a checkpoint they were taken. They were 13 and 14. The regime forces took them. My older brother found out that they didn't reach the new area. No one in my family knew where my brothers were.

They were kids, 13 and 14! There was nothing happening on their way, they just stopped at a checkpoint and they saw their IDs and they knew that my brothers were leaving Ghouta. They wanted to use them to get information about what was happening inside Ghouta, so they took my brothers and went to a security station. What I understood in the end is that they were beaten severely. One of my brothers talked but the other didn't. They released the one who didn't talk, but the other one, Mohammed, talked only after he was beaten. I mean of course if they beat a 14 year old kid he would say whatever they want. I don't know what he told them but they didn't release him, and then my parents started the chase between the security stations, searching for him.

The last time my father went to ask about him, they gave my father Mohammed's ID and told him not to ask about him again, that he died while being tortured. But we didn't see his body, they just gave him his ID and his things. That day I talked to my mother and I was crying and she told me not to believe them, she told me that if she didn't see his body she won't believe that he is dead. She was calming me down. I raised my two brothers (Mohammed and Anas), I was their second mother, my mother gave birth to them but I raised them!

Before my brother went missing, my uncle went missing, he disappeared in mysterious circumstances; he was at his in-law's house one night never went home. We still don't know if he is dead or alive. So first my cousin died, then my uncle went missing, and now my brother.

It was so much to bear. I did a condolences house here in Jordan because I was almost sure that he was dead. And I raised him! When I visited my parents' house the first time after I got married he was so upset with me; I will never forget it. He beat my arm with a slipper and yelled "why did you



go?" He had told my mother that he would pay my husband to return me. I did everything with them, they were my babies. I was very affected when he was gone.

15 days after I heard about Mohammed's death, it was 24 April 2015, 6 PM. My brother's wife called and told me that a bomb was dropped on my parent's house and that she didn't know if they were alive or not! I lost my mind. I told her "What do you mean you don't know if they are alive or not?!" but they still didn't know" I was distraught; I wanted to know what happened to my family, my father, mother and younger brother. My uncle said he was near where the explosion took place but the security forces were surrounding the building and not letting anyone in. He told me to wait.

I was in my house pacing through the rooms, praying to God for them to be safe. I was becoming crazy. I stayed up all night praying and reading Quran. I kept asking my husband to let me go to Damascus, but at that time if any Syrian who went to back to Syria wouldn't be allowed to return to Jordan. But I wanted to see my parents even if it meant losing my house or my kids or my husband. I wanted to see my parents with my own eyes.

The next day my uncle's wife called and said "I don't know what to tell you but may you have the longer life" (something that is said in the Arabic culture when someone dies). She also said that they removed them from the ruins and they are dead.

At that moment I wished that I had died. She said "They are dead but Anas is alive." I went crazy and started to break things. My husband heard the noise and I told him "I must go to Damascus immediately, my parents died and I must go there." I was shaking him as I was telling him that, I couldn't

think. He reminded me that if I went there, I might not return," but I said "I don't want to return, I don't want to live with you anymore." At that moment I hated my husband because I felt that he was the reason I was not with them. I told him "You brought me here! You made me lose them!" His niece was holding me trying to calm me down, but I couldn't accept anyone paying their condolences to me. It was too much.

I collapsed and fainted and woke up to find a doctor trying to wake me up. I woke up screaming and calling my father, telling my father not to leave me. I called my cousin in Syria and told him to take pictures of my parents because I wanted to believe that they are dead. I told him that I will never forgive him if he didn't. When he sent me the pictures, they didn't look normal, their faces were bruised and swollen and there was blood. My mother's eye was very swollen and her face was covered with blood.

As I looked at my father's picture, I asked him "Why did you leave us?" I told my cousin to take pictures of the funeral, but my cousin said "Stop torturing yourself, why do you need the pictures?" But I said "Isn't it enough that I can't be there, take pictures of everything and send them to me."

It was a Thursday night, and my family didn't sleep in that house on Thursdays because of the violence, but it was their destiny to be there that night. They were planning to go out, and my brother Anas went to get a cab. As soon as he opened the door, the bomb hit the house and he was thrown outside. But my parents were still inside.

They also sent me pictures of Anas. I didn't recognize him at first—you would think that he was also dead, all bruises and scars and blood. I called him and asked what happened he said he didn't know—he woke up and found himself in the hospital. Anas lived through the first shock of losing

Mohammed who was with him in detention and the second shock of the death of my parents.

It was so difficult to think of their deaths. What was their pain? What were they thinking? What did they see? What did they feel? When I go back to that moment I wish that time stopped when we were young and happy. After they washed their bodies they sent me their pictures before burying them. The bruises still showed. Then my cousin sent pictures after they put them in the grave. I started feeling that I am losing them more and more, and yes they have died but I felt that after they bury them there won't be any more pictures of them. They will be buried in the ground and I won't be able to see them anymore.

At that time I hated my husband so much because I felt that he was the reason for everything that happened, the reason for taking me away from them, the reason that I got married at an early age, that I didn't live with my parents long enough. I hated him so much that I hated to see him. I would have risked losing my children because I wanted to go see them. I can't describe how it feels to lose both your mother and father the same day, it is very hard. I started hating everyone who has a mother and a father and I started hating anyone who talks about their parents.

The thought of divorce was farfetched but now I wished for it to happen. He never contained me, even in the most difficult situations. He should have made me feel that I can count on him and that he is my support. I have nothing to lose if I got divorced, my only loss would be my children but I can't take it anymore. I am human too! I need him to feel me when I am at my weakest point.

But when I think about who is responsible for their deaths, it is the regime

and Bashar. If I could avenge their deaths I wouldn't miss it. If a day would come where we judge and control the regime like it controlled us, I would. It is not only me; I am not the only one who got hurt, millions of Syrians did.

There is a missing or dead person in every Syrian house.

If Bashar was on trial and they ruled the maximum penalty it wouldn't be worth a tear from a mother's eye cried for her son, or a wife cried for her husband. You can say that it might make our hearts feel a bit better, but the problem is it won't bring back what we lost.

**A trial won't bring justice, but you would know that you would live in country that has no injustice.** We already lived it but we are seeking a chance for our children not to live what we lived.

We are broken. We all have the same pain, because each house was harmed in one way or the other, we all suffered from this. I feel that all Syrians have the same pain.

You won't find a Syrian person who wasn't harmed by the war. This affected me with depression and anger. Some days, I can't tolerate any words from anyone and I feel like I hate my family. Now I am refusing everything in my life and I want to run away and stay away. I became and still am a lost person.

I took sessions at CVT, before the sessions I was a ruined wall. The sessions were very helpful and I benefited from the exercises I learned. I was always scared before the sessions, and I felt insecure and didn't have confidence in people, but I benefited a lot from the sessions and became better. I want to continue healing. I am injured with a big wound.



I learned patience from my mother; she was very patient because she lived in a house with a big family just like me, but it was bigger for her so she taught me how to be patient and that a person doesn't get what they want in a single move. You have to be patient and take it step by step to reach what you want.

And I learned generosity from my father; his name was Akram which means the most generous. I feel that even after his death he still has a good reputation and it's good to have this in his children as well, to keep his good reputation.

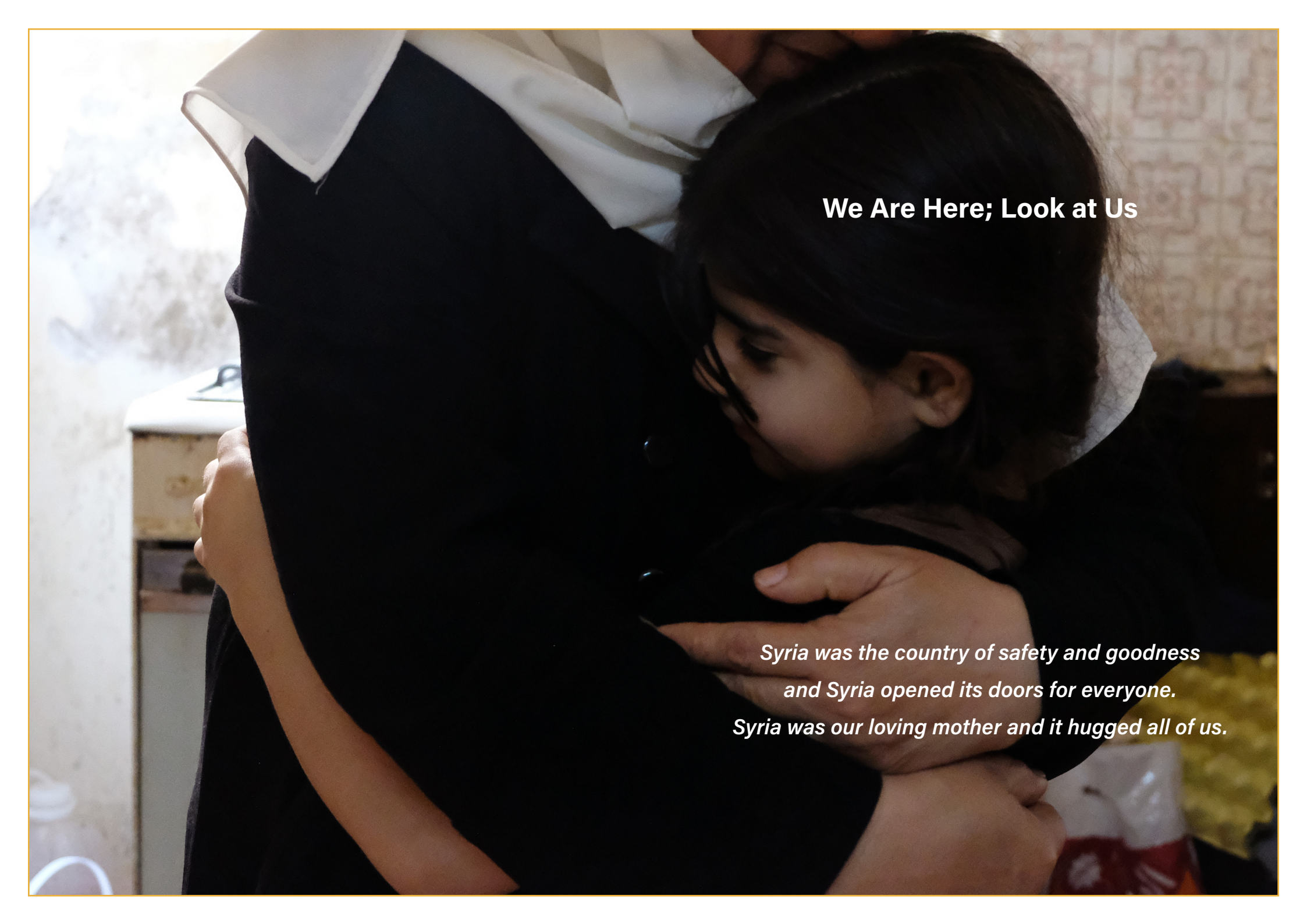
My daughter is a teenager now and I need to sit with her and listen to her just like I used to sit and talk to my father. I need to make her feel that I am listening. I shouldn't get angry or nervous. I have to understand her and I should find a way to make her understand right from wrong, just like my father used to do with us.

I don't know why the regime did these things. The regime does not fear God, it is not a legitimate regime, if they were human or feel with humanity they wouldn't have hurt so many humans.

Syria was the country of safety and goodness and Syria opened its doors for everyone. Syria was our loving mother and it hugged all of us.

Justice is achieved by trial and the maximum torture for the criminals. But even if it happened, there won't be justice—nothing is perfect because nothing will bring back my family who died.

I would like to say to the world, **We are here, Look at us.** There is pain inside of us.



**We Are Here; Look at Us**

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and Syria opened its doors for everyone.  
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