

## Mariam al-Saeedi: A Thirty Year Search for a Missing Son



Members of political parties and those who differed ideologically with Kassir had resorted to kidnapping him several times, for a few hours each time, in order to scare and discipline the rebellious young man. (Photo: Hassan Bahsoun)

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**The biggest of the Lebanese Civil War's open wounds is the one concerning the disappeared. Thousands of families do not know the fate of their relatives who disappeared at different stages of the conflict.**

Mariam al-Saeedi was a regular Lebanese woman. At 16, she had her first child. Eleven years later, she had five.

The teenage mother's eldest son, Maher Kassir, was her favorite toy, reminding her of her childhood. An amateur tailor, she would make him and herself matching clothes so they would look like twins.

Al-Saeedi wanted to be more than a mere housewife. She educated herself, acquiring skills that could be transferred to her children.

The children were always outstanding in school. But when al-Saeedi joined its parents committee, she did not know that Kassir would lead her to form another one, the Committee for the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon.

It was Tuesday 17 June 1982 at 5am when her life and that of her family's was turned upside down. Al-Saeedi's son went missing during clashes between a group from his political party, on one hand, and the Israeli army and collaborating Lebanese militias, on the other.

They were resisting the Israeli occupation army at the southern entrance of Beirut near the Lebanese University's Faculty of Sciences in Hadath.

Al-Saeedi has met with several fighters from the group that fought her son at the Faculty of Sciences. They confirmed to her that her son's group was captured and summarily executed. Even before this shocking incident, al-Saeedi and her children were already feeling the effects of living in war-torn Beirut. Kassir would get into arguments and fights with some of their neighbors who belonged to another confession.

Members of political parties and those who differed ideologically with Kassir had resorted to kidnapping him several times, for a few hours each time, in order to scare and discipline the rebellious young man.

Without telling his family, Kassir had joined a party involved in the internal conflict, in addition to resistance against the Israeli enemy. Al-Saeedi only found out about it when he went missing.

That day, al-Saeedi began the search for her child. She asked where he was when he disappeared and the nature of his role in his party. When his party ran out of information to share, she went to the opposing party to ask them.

There, al-Saeedi met four other women on the same journey. They were mothers and wives of men caught in the same maelstrom.

Their search led them to officials in parties suspected of kidnapping their children. These women coordinated and eventually organized meetings, leading to the founding of the families' committee. Today, they are still calling for uncovering the fate of their loved ones.

Years passed and wrinkles began to cover al-Saeedi's face. She is now 63, while Kassir remains a beautiful baby inside a frame on the wall.

Only five years ago, al-Saeedi's heart would still warm up in the hope that he could be found alive in an Israeli prison. Some of the forcibly disappeared were transferred to Israel and later released during prisoner swaps.

Some who participated in the war declared their "remorse" and some spoke about what happened during the heat of battles. But this reduced her hope of finding Kassir alive. Al-Saeedi's journey was steered toward the mass graves spread around Lebanon by the civil war.

For the past several years, al-Saeedi has met with several fighters from the group that fought her son at the Faculty of Sciences. They confirmed to her that her son's group was captured and summarily executed. They were buried in a mass grave in the campus gardens.

Now al-Saeedi is back to square one. She handed the files related to the battle at the Faculty of Sciences to a lawyer, Nizar Saghieh. He will be presenting the case to the appropriate courts to unearth the mass grave and identify the remains. It might also answer the persistent question: is Kassir here or is he somewhere else?

Al-Saeedi classmates were young men and women similar to those whom Kassir would have joined had he not been a citizen in a country that sells its children cheap and uses them as fodder for a filthy war. Now closer to the truth, his mother could not have survived for 30 years without emotional and social support.

Al-Saeedi admits that Kassir "took with him some of his siblings' needs" and asks for their forgiveness for the times she had left them alone to go look for their brother. Today, she spends every possible moment with them and her grandchildren to make up for the lost time.

After her field journey stopped, she began an internal quest. She found that painting is the best medium to unload the suffering of hundreds of families in Lebanon.

Four years ago, al-Saeedi enrolled in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University to study drawing. Her classmates were young men and women similar to those whom Kassir would have joined had he not been a citizen in a country that sells its children cheap and uses them as fodder for a filthy war.

Kassir is in every corner of al-Saeedi's house. He greets visitors with a smile from the marble bust she made to commemorate him.

She is currently planning another work in his memory, a piece depicting an empty room with its doors wide open. In the past, she would have painted prison cells, bars, and jailers assuming he was detained somewhere.

After the news of his execution, she sees him in his room, emptied of hope of a return.

Al-Saeedi said that God's will took away Kassir place among the living but her will brought him back in her paintings. Now it is up to the will of the courts to bring his remains back from the Faculty of Science to a more proper burial place.