

Abdullah's account

'They have left a scar in my heart that can never be erased'

NAME Abdullah Rashid Saleh¹⁹⁶
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THE AIRSTRIKE Lost seven family members: his two wives Khamisa and Sajidah and his children Yamamah (age 11), Rasheed (age 7), Ibrahim (age 6), Amal (age 4), and Mahmoud (9 months old)

During the war against ISIS, Abdullah and his family moved from their home in Salahaddin governorate to Hawija in order to escape the fighting and Coalition airstrikes. He did not want to stay in Hawija, but he did not manage to reach another governorate because of ISIS, which captured and tortured people on the run. Hawija in 2015 was a mustering point of sorts for civilians trying to escape from Salahaddin as it had routes into Kirkuk city and Erbil. In Hawija, he and fifteen family members lived in a simple rented house, which he estimates was about 250 metres away from the later area of impact. There were also some members of his extended family from his tribe living in Hawija. He was unaware of the proximity of the VBIED factory: 'If I had known about the ammunition factory and the Dutch plane strike, we would not have gone to that area.' He did not let his children go to school in Hawija because these had all been taken over by ISIS, which 'used to teach their curriculum in schools, the ways of carrying weapons', so instead he 'hid them from ISIS'.

About the Coalition, Abdullah says that, initially, 'people were very happy and excited about the arrival of the Western forces because we wanted

to be saved from ISIS[.] Our life was full of pain, fatigue and deprivation. So, we wanted to get rid of them in any way, but [the Coalition's] targets were wrong without [accurate] intelligence or knowledge [on the ground]. They were hitting more populated areas than ISIS targets. Most of their strikes were wrong, especially the Dutch strike. How could they carry out a strike in a large residential neighbourhood full of people, knowing that there was a pile of missiles for ISIS?' As such, people, Abdullah included, became increasingly negative about the international intervention.

Abdullah: 'On the day of 2 June 2015 at twelve midnight, it was a painful and sad day, a day in which my loved ones left. I lost my wives, my sons, and my daughters. [...] Before going to sleep, I used to pray and read the Quran. My first wife and her children were sleeping on the roof of the house and my other wife was sleeping in the space at the top of the house. [I] went up to the first floor, and I saw my children and my wife asleep[.] [...] I heard the sound of a plane hovering in the area, a missile was launched from the plane [...]. I felt that the Day of Judgment had come because of the horror of the situation as the blast threw me a distance of five to six metres. My wife was sleeping beside me, but I could not see her because of the white smoke, and shrapnel landed on my bed in which I should have slept. I would have been cut into two halves if I had slept there. [...] I went to my family on the first floor. Bricks and walls fell on them, I shouted and cried out loud, "Come and save my children." I could not remove the bricks and rubble that fell on my family. The rubble was too big[.] My older son called me: "My father, my father, I did not die. Save me." Bricks fell on his leg. [He] pulled himself out with difficulty. My daughter also called me saying, "Dad, I did not die, please save me." A neighbour came and helped me to remove the rubble. [My daughter] was hurt from her waist and below.

Abdullah's wives Khamisa and Sajidah, his daughter Amal, and his sons Rasheed, Ibrahim and Mahmoud died immediately that night. He took his daughter Yamamah, who was a little over eleven years old at the time, to a hospital in Mosul, where she died later that morning. While they were driving to Mosul, she asked her father about her mother and her youngest brother, Mahmoud. Abdullah had no choice but to say that they were fine, and they were waiting for her to get better so they can all be reunited. 'She hugged me and said that she loves me. She slept while hugging me and then she died. [...] Overnight, I lost my soul, my body, my family, everything.' He goes on to state that his family has 'left a scar in my heart that can never be erased.'

Because of the bombing, Abdullah lost most of his family, his home, and his car. He now lives in a house in bad living conditions, with no money for renovation. He has trouble making ends meet: 'We do not have enough money to support the family or to have a decent life because [my job] is a daily wage, which is not sufficient because I work one day and then there is no work for five days, and so on.'

Ever since the bombing, Abdullah and his remaining children suffer from trauma. His son 'cannot focus on his studies' and 'cries a lot because he remembers his mother and siblings. He has been hurt so much.' His other child gets scared every time he hears an airplane. Abdullah himself continues to suffer from nightmares and sleeping disorders.

Now, more than six years later, Abdullah has not been given any form of assistance. He holds the Coalition, and in particular the Dutch government, responsible for his tragedy. 'We did not receive any support of any kind, neither financial, psychological, legal, nor even medical. [...] We only met with Al-Ghad organisation and

we filed a [legal] complaint and we hope that our voice will reach the Dutch government, so that it may compensate us and help us to go back to what we were before.' He wants psychological support for his son, and financial support to rebuild his life. He moreover wants answers: 'I hope I can meet [the Dutch] face-to-face. I want to meet the person who killed my family and ask him why did he do that? Why did he kill many innocent people? What was their guilt? Did he regret his action that has hurt me and hurt many Iraqis and all those who have lost loved ones? [...] I want to ask him, "Would you like this to happen with your family as it happened with my family?"'

¹⁹⁶ Abdullah's account is also included in *Als de bom valt: Danny Ghosen in Irak* (2022: VPRO), documentary.