

## **Ahlam Mahmoud: Taking a Stand in Memory of My Son**



*Ahlam Mahmoud, a refugee from Iraq, works as a case manager and outreach coordinator with the Chicago chapter of ICNA Relief and the co-founder and former Director of Outreach for the Iraqi Mutual Aid Society in Chicago. She is the recipient of the Muslim Women's Alliance 2008 "Inspiring Woman Award" and the YWCA 2011 YWomen Leadership Awards. In this narrative, she recalls a harrowing story from before she came to the United States.*

Every morning I pray and pray to Allah to accept my volunteer work with refugees so I can be in Jannah (heaven), with my ten year old son, Anas.

When the USA invaded Iraq, my oldest child, Anas, was nine years old. When the B-52s began bombing, the sound alone made my children throw up. We slept away from the windows because they would shatter. We left our life to Allah. Anas was so brave. My daughter, Rukahya, who was five, and my Abdullah, who was 7, followed his example.

When we ran out of drinking water I left the house for the first time in days to get some. I saw dead bodies of men, women and children on both sides of the streets. It was startling to smell, and I knew the dogs would start to eat them. I called my cousins, and we buried 40 bodies deep enough for the dogs not to get to them.

From this moment I believed that I have to help my fellow Iraqis. Before the war we had no Iraqi humanitarian organizations. So I reached out to the Western agencies such as International Relief, Red Crescent, Women for Women, Christian PeaceMaker Team.

Because of this civic activity, the local militias in Iraq suspected I was working for the American military. They kidnapped me. For eight days, I was handcuffed, blind-folded, kicked, slapped, and hit on my head with the back of a pistol. They fired a bullet next to my right ear, and I lost my hearing in that ear.

When I was released, we fled for Jordan, then Egypt, then Syria. I explained what was happening to my 9 year old Anas and he explained it to my Ruqaya and Abdullah. The little ones listened to him so well. Anas became my best friend.

But on the morning of May 3, 2006, Anas said he had a pain in his right shoulder. As refugees, we were not able to afford a private clinic, so I took him to one of the hospitals for Iraqi refugees. They gave Anas an injection, but they gave him an overdose. It caused internal bleeding, and he was taken for an emergency surgery. The last time I saw him he looked at me as they took him into the elevator. The last words I heard from him were “You are my friend.” My nine-year-old son died 15 minutes later.

The men in my family never allowed me to see him, nor go to the cemetery. I was not even told where his grave was.

My then-husband took six months to recover from the shock of losing his son. To stay patient, I began working with agencies like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to help Iraqi refugees like myself. The Syrian government imprisoned me for refusing to gather intelligence for them. I was beaten, I was tortured in their custody. My kids had been taken from me and I didn't even know how they were.

With pressure from Amnesty, I was released, and put on a plane with my kids. I did not know where I was going. The first time I saw the sun in five months was from the plane. I arrived in Chicago and Amnesty International sent a woman named Beth Ann Tuopin to check and see if I needed something. Three months later, she and I co-founded a non profit, Iraqi Mutual Aid Society. We collaborated with foundations and organizations including the Illinois State Department, Refugee Assistance Programs and ICNA Relief, where I work today as a case manager.

I am doing all this to be with my son Anas, in Jannah. I am also doing it because I never want to see another mother or her children go through what we have gone through. As citizens of the world, we must never allow our governments to use war to rob any other mother of her child, ever again. Let us never forget to use our voices to make sure our governments do what is just and what is right.

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