

The amazing story of Masad Tuema that was kidnapped by the Syrians, that denied all the years his existence on their land. It was published by his brother the famous journalist Khaled Abu Tuema

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Masaad Abu Tuema's Strange Story

Rescue from Damascus

Yerushalayim (p. B18) by Khaled Abu Tuema -- I have been in journalism for 18 years. Eighteen years in which I've covered dozens and perhaps hundreds of various and strange events. Some of them were painful, some were shocking, some were heart wrenching and some were joyous.

But one of the most amazing, shocking and moving stories was in fact in my own back yard, right under my nose. For 14 years I had been waiting for this moment, the moment of the end to my own private story and at which point I could reveal it. A month ago this happened. After 14 years of uncertainty, struggles and painful switching between hope and despair, the moment arrived in which my older brother, Masaad, returned home. After so many years of being imprisoned in a small underground cell on the outskirts of Damascus, a different brother returned to us, different than the one we had known. A man who had not seen the light of day, who did not know when it was day and when it was night. A man who for years ate half a pita for breakfast and a potato in the evening, who fought with the rats over his bread, and who would tirelessly repeat details from his memory so as not to lose his sanity. After 14 years, my brother returned to us, sick and broken, but alive.

It is hard to recount all the events and acts that brought about his long-awaited release from prison and his return to his mother and father. Today too, there are still many details that cannot be revealed, and the reader will forgive me if the story in these pages appears to have holes in it.

Vanished in Greece

The story begins with an innocent holiday in Greece in the winter of 1988. My brother Masaad, my elder by three years, took off on his own from Ben-Gurion Airport on what was meant to be a short holiday, and did not return.

Masaad, who was then 28, worked in the YMCA in West Jerusalem as an accountant, and before that was a clerk in the Bank Leumi branch in East Jerusalem. He decided to take a vacation in Greece before beginning a new job in a bank in London. He wanted to take this time to "clear his head," before beginning his new position.

Masaad had attended high school in the Pardes Hanna Agricultural School. He loved the good life, and often went to parties and made other outings. His Hebrew was fluent, and he was never interested in either the news or politics.

Masaad left on vacation to Greece on February 11, 1988. Until December 13, 2001, all traces of him had vanished and the earth appeared to have swallowed him. We heard nothing from him, and all our attempts to locate him were in vain. For nearly 14 years we lived in a state of uncertainty. Many thoughts went through our minds, and we often lost hope that we would see him alive again.

In the last phone call from him in Greece, Masaad told us that he planned to return home to Jerusalem in a few days. He was in the habit of keeping in almost daily contact with me and the rest of the family. About a week after he had left Israel, all contact with him ceased. Days and weeks went by, and the mystery only deepened. Messengers sent by the family searched throughout Greece in an attempt to find a trace of his whereabouts, but came back empty-handed. We were helpless. We did not know to whom to turn.

"Your Brother is in Syria"

The first crack in the wall enclosing the circumstances of his disappearances came after about three years. In an anonymous phone call to one family member, the caller said: "Your brother is in Syria," and hung up. We were stunned. What did Masaad have to do with Syria? How did he get there? And if he is there, why doesn't he get in touch personally?

From here began the long journey of searches and attempts to locate my brother in Syria. The family made a decision to keep any information it obtained under wraps. We were afraid that any report about his being in Syria was liable harm him. After all, we didn't know what he was doing there exactly and if he was even alive. Except for the tiny bit of information from this anonymous phone call, we had no other information as to his fate.

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As part of our searches, we appealed to dozens of international organizations, including the Red Cross, Amnesty and other international bodies. These checked with the Syrian authorities and always returned with the same answer: "No man of this name is on Syrian soil."

In the summer of 1992, Amnesty representatives visited Israel and took testimony about Masaad from family members. We told them of his sudden disappearance and the anonymous phone call. Amnesty representatives promised to raise the matter in their talks with highest echelons in Syria. We told them that we feared for his life, since if he was alive, or if he were free, he would certainly have called us. After all, he always had.

In the summer of 1992, International Red Cross representatives notified us that all their attempts to find Masaad in Syria had come to naught. They said that they had carried out an extensive check with Syrian authorities, and that Masaad was not being held in any jail, prison or a government institution inside that country. After hearing this, we began to doubt the information given us by the anonymous caller, that Masaad was in Syria and we decided to expand our searches to other countries.

Again we sent messengers and private detectives to Greece, to try and follow up on his last movements there.

Other representatives were sent to Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Cyprus.

This time, luckily, our efforts bore fruit. The private detective we sent to Greece was able to reach a hotel worker who identified the picture shown him of Masaad and said he remembered him. He related that he saw Masaad four years earlier in the company of another man, known as "Abu Rami." According to information given the private detective, Abu Rami was a Palestinian living and working in Syria. Other checks showed that Abu Rami had relatives in one of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. A few months later, we were able to locate his relatives in Lebanon. His relatives said they had not seen Abu Rami in over ten years, but they had heard that he belonged to a Palestinian organization based in Syria. There are ten Palestinian organizations in Syria that have been under the Syrian government's auspices since 1982. Abu Rami, so the rumors went, had joined the "Rejectionist Front," which was opposed to the peace process and which advocated continuing the armed struggle against Israel.

Masaad is in the Hands of "Fatah Revolution"

This information focused our searches again on Syria. It was not a simple task. There are hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees living in Syria, and looking for one person there named Abu Rami, was like looking for a needle in a hay stack. But we knew that the key to resolving the mystery was in his hands. In the search for Abu Rami, Palestinian, Jordanian, Syrian and even American elements took part. In the summer of 1994, another breakthrough was made: Two Palestinians in a refugee camp near Damascus identified Masaad by the picture shown to them by Samir (not his real name) who was sent to Syria by the family. The two related that they had seen Masaad at the beginning of 1988 in the company of three people in a restaurant on the outskirts of Damascus. They remembered him well, despite the fact that six years had gone by. They remembered him because it was not every day that they met an Israeli Arab in Syria with perfect Hebrew. However, they could not say where he had disappeared to since. Samir got the impression that the two knew more about Masaad's fate, but were scared to speak while on Syrian soil. At the family's initiative, the two were secretly brought to another country in the Middle East. The information they provided significantly contributed to the progress of the search. For the first time, we had reliable information on the identity and affiliation of the people with whom Masaad had been with in Greece and Syria. We learned that these people belonged to a radical branch of Fatah, known as "Fatah Revolution." This is an organization that was established by Fatah officers in protest of Arafat's consent to leave Lebanon in 1982.

The thrust of our efforts was now turned to this organization. Since this was a small organization, that worked discretely, we did not know how to approach them.

In January 1995, an American journalist went to Damascus in an attempt to help the family obtain further information. The journalist stayed in Damascus for two weeks, during which he held phony interviews with senior officials from Palestinian organizations active in Syria. In each of his meetings, he asked about Masaad, explaining that he knew him personally and had heard he was in Syria.

The man even offered a large sum of money for any piece of information that could help decipher the mystery shrouding the circumstances of his disappearance. However, the dozens of people with whom he met vigorously denied that they had heard about him, and said they had no idea what he was talking about.

At some point the men of these organizations began to suspect the journalist and followed him. When he would return to his hotel room, he would find that someone had been there before him and had searched his things. We deliberately planted in the room notes with the names and addresses of people outside of Syria, because we assumed that they would copy them. We hoped that somebody there would make contact with these people whose names and phone numbers we planted in the room. We also planted documents in the room with misleading details about Masaad and the story of his disappearance. For understandable reasons, I will not go into detail here about what was written on these notes.

Information in Exchange for Payment

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The bait worked. Three weeks passed and our relatives in Jordan received an anonymous call. This time it was a woman with a Palestinian-Syrian accent, who called herself Fatma. She gave us a very important piece of information on my brother's whereabouts. Fatma said she was willing to meet with a family representative in a European country to pass along this information in exchange for payment.

The meeting with Fatma took place in November 1995, a woman in her 30s, who was very nervous and panicky. She chain-smoked cigarettes and did stop looking to the side to see if anyone was listening in on the conversation or following her. Two brawny men waited for her outside the restaurant. A few minutes after she began talking, it was clear to us that this was very reliable information, and that Fatma knew details about my brother. While she had never seen him personally, later it became clear that all the details she gave were correct.

In general, the information Fatma gave us indicated that Masaad was being held against his will in one of the Palestinian organizations' training bases on the outskirts of Damascus. She did not know why he was being held there. Again, I apologize to the readers for the scanty information I am giving, because I don't want to hurt the people who helped us along the way. Many of them are still in Syria and there is reason to fear for their lives.

The "search team," which was a control room in all senses and which included a few dozen people, was now joined by elements from Jordan and Syria. However, months went by until the first messenger sent by the family was able to get close to the training base where my brother was supposedly being held. The plan was clear: The messenger was to rent an apartment nearby, and from there to conduct surveillance of the base. He was also to report on anyone either entering or leaving the base. To help the search mission the messenger was disguised as a kerosene salesman with a donkey and cart. Any information he obtained was sent to another country, and from there to Israel. Members of the search team were deployed in various Middle Eastern countries. The messenger remained in the region for a year and a half, without managing to bring any sign of life from Masaad.

At this stage it was decided to make use of the services of senior PA officials in Ramallah and Gaza. Although the latter are hated by the radical groups in Damascus and since the Oslo agreements are even accused of collaboration with Israel, some of them were able to obtain information that Masaad was still alive. They refused to say how they obtained this information. In the first half of 1997, a senior American figure visited Damascus and met with senior Syrian officials. The American raised Masaad's case and asked the Syrian government for clarifications. The Syrians promised to investigate the matter again and to come up with an answer within seven days.

The reply came two weeks later and, like the previous ones, was negative. The Syrians insisted that Masaad was not on Syrian soil. Not only that, the Syrians contended that they had checked out each of the Palestinian organizations in their country and none of them admitted to holding him.

This official information from the Syrian authorities returned us to our starting point, but my gut feeling made me believe that someone, nevertheless, was concealing details on Masaad's fate.

I knew that my brother was a strong man and no less stubborn than me, and that if he was in trouble he would certainly hang on in the hope that someone would rescue him. I felt that I could read his thoughts. I knew that we could not give up. I learned from experience that one can never lose hope. I thought about the POWs and MIAs in Israel. I closely followed the struggle of the Sultan Yaakub MIAs in Lebanon and I admired the determination of the relatives, who for 20 years have been trying to find their loved ones. I saw how the family of navigator Ron Arad persevered in its attempts to bring him home. I drew inspiration and strength from these unfortunate families. Between 1997 and 1999, more actions were taken to locate my brother. Some of these I can never talk about, and all I can say is that some of them were similar to operations in detective movies.

At the end of 1999, the mystery was finally solved. One of the leaders of a Palestinian organization in Damascus admitted in a conversation with a "messenger" that Masaad truly was being held by them and had been since May 1988. He refused to divulge any more information except for the fact that he was "breathing." What worried us very much was that he said that the organization planned to "get rid" of him soon, hinting that he would be killed.

He refused to say why Masaad had been held for all this time. Although this man did not give precise information as to where my brother was being held, I managed, again through messengers, to find out where Masaad was being held, along with other people. This was a different training base than the one we had thought he was being held in earlier.

Again we sent messengers in disguise, again we rented apartments and again we renewed our surveillance.

Slowly a picture emerged. In the center of the training base was an underground shelter, entry to which was concealed by bushes. Only a few people knew that behind the door of the shelter were steps leading down to dark prison cells. In each of these cells one man was held in solitary confinement. From the information reaching me, it turned out that none of the prisoners knew about the others. Not only that, it turned out the Masaad was being held under another name, making it harder to find him.

For months I and the rest of the family held contact with dozens of people in Israel and elsewhere in the world in an attempt to rescue him. We knew that time was not in our favor, and that every day that passed increased the danger to his life. We did not know what his physical and mental condition was. Throughout the entire period we

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had not one piece of testimony from anybody who had seen him or heard him. This entire time we had to decide whether to rely on our judgment as to whether the information we had was reliable.

In retrospect, it turns out that quite a few people had lied to us in the last 14 years. There were those who demanded money after claiming they had seen him and even given him candies and presents. Others offered to help us in return for payment, although they never meant it.

In the year 2000, a short time after President Bashar Assad came into power, I was able, through a third party, to make a connection with the presidential palace in Syria. The same source, who has British citizenship, spoke with close associates of Bashar Assad, and insisted that they act to secure Masaad's release.

The answer given to the British source was unexpected and numbing: The Syrian authorities told him that from their examination and from their information, Masaad was no longer alive.

We were stunned by this information, because we saw it as a semi-official statement from the Syrian administration. I decided not to tell the family. For days and months I kept this information to myself. I passed many sleepless nights, thinking what else could be done.

One morning I got up and decided that this could not be the end; I decided to renew the control room more aggressively. All the information we had accumulated indicated the Syrian version was not true. So as not to tire the reader, I will not go into detail on the ways I obtained this information, and so as not to confuse the reader, I will skip many details and dates.

All I can say is that there were night-long meetings, detailed plans, map sketches, and a great deal of coffee. What was different this time was that elements in Syria were willing to help, and openly so. The rescue plan that was formulated was detailed and ready. On the eve of execution, there were contacts with sources in Washington, New York, Amman, Beirut and of course Damascus. The date set for the operation was November 3, in other words, two months ago. That day Syrian security forces raided the training base belonging to "Fatah Revolution" on the outskirts of Damascus. Heading the force was a Syrian Brigadier General. The Syrians ordered everyone on the base not to move. The force went straight to the entrance of the underground shelter, thanks to the information we gave them. They broke open the door and entered the area of the solitary cells. "Who here is Masaad?" shouted one of the Syrians. Masaad, who was in his cell, was stunned. "Who knows me by my real name?" he asked himself, he later related. Very soon he realized that unlike what he thought, he was not being taken to be killed, and that for the first time in a long time, these were "friendly" agents.

"Your Brother is Alive"

A few days later I received a phone call from the Red Cross representative in Israel. I was staying then in Ramallah, within the context of my work. The phone call caused me great confusion. "It is about your request to find your missing brother," I was told. I was sure she wanted to tell me that his body had been found. "Is this good or bad news?" I asked with trepidation. "No, in fact it's good news," she told me. From that moment, everything around me grew misty. I was confused, I stuttered, I left the meeting I was in and went straight to the Red Cross offices in Sheikh Jarah in East Jerusalem. There a bespectacled Swiss worker waited for me with a smile on her face. On her desk was Masaad's file. I quickly read the document she showed me, written in French. In it was Masaad's testimony, which began with the sentence: "I have a brother who lives in Jerusalem and works as a journalist. I don't know where he is, but he can be found through the Israeli press association." At that moment I knew he was still sane, otherwise he would have said that I worked for Israeli television in the Arabic department, which would have led to his immediate assassination. The woman told me that my brother was alive and that he was okay, and that he very much misses us and wants to go home. A chill went through my whole body, as if I were in a dream. I had dreamed of the moment that he would return, but I always thought it would be by chance, in the main street of some city, in some country. Who would have believed that one day he would return home, to East Jerusalem?

In accordance with Red Cross policy, the representatives refused to give me other details, but did say that Masaad had been given permission to leave Syria for Israel and that the Red Cross was waiting for approval from the Foreign Ministry and the security establishment. I was not allowed to talk to him, and was only told that he was in sound mind but would need a great deal of care and emotional rehabilitation.

I quickly went home to my parents and told them that Masaad was on his way home. My mother could not stop crying. My father was in shock. He then did not believe me at first, until they were convinced that this was a true report and not another rumor. We then began to count the minutes until his return home.

On December 13, on Hanukah, my family's Hanukah miracle began. At 6:00 in the morning, a Red Cross convoy left Damascus in the direction of the border with Jordan, accompanied by cars with members of Syrian intelligence inside. In one of the cars sat Masaad, next to two Red Cross representatives. From the Jordanian border he was given to other Red Cross representatives in Jordan, and they took him straight to the Israeli embassy in Amman. A short while later, he left there with a permit allowing him to enter through the Allenby Bridge crossing. Red Cross representatives, who stayed all this time in touch with us, asked us not to come to the bridge and wait at home. They stressed that we had nothing to worry about since Masaad was under the care of the Red Cross and they were responsible for bringing him to the door of the house.

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Outside the house, in the freezing cold, dozens of people waited. Even passers by who did not know us came to witness this rare spectacle.

At 7:45 Friday evening the Red Cross car arrived at the door of our home. I was so confused that I ran to the Red Cross and embraced him. He was when I saw everyone rushing to the other side of the car, did I realize he was not Masaad. And then I saw him for the first time: Standing on his feet, but entirely stooped over. He was very thin and weak, and could not stop crying and laughing at the same time. People jumped on him and hugged him until his glasses broke. He recognized my father and mother and me, but my sister, who was six when he vanished, and my brother who was 11, he had to be reintroduced to. He had no voice at all, and he appeared very weak and held a pack of Syrian el-Hamra cigarettes in his hand. For 14 years he had neither smoked nor drunk coffee, and since his release, he had not stopped smoking and drinking coffee.

Only two or three days later did he sit down and tell us his story. Thousands of people, without exaggeration, came to our home to see him with their own eyes.

And his stories were hair-raising. There were times I could not listen, they were so shocking. He described the methods of torture and humiliation he had undergone in captivity. He was beaten, given shock treatments and deprived of sleep for days on end. There was no orderly interrogation, but each time someone would come into his cell, question him, beat him and leave.

For 14 years he did not shave or have his hair cut, he was not taken outside, and his eyesight had deteriorated. He did not have hot water, and he washed his hair out water from a small tap in the cell. While underground he lost all sense of time: He did not know what time it was, what day, whether it was day or night. He ate twice a day, and his breakfast was ten green olives and half a pita. His evening menu usually included a potato and soup. Sometimes he would fight with the rats, which would come into his cell and grab his food. It is hard for me to forget the sight he described, how he would fight the rats, with him pulling one side and a rat on the other, until the pita tore into two, and each of them retired with their half.

I asked him how he managed to survive, and he explained that he would repeat to himself every detail he remembered, like phone numbers, car license numbers. Sometimes he would hold conversations with himself, to stay sane.

Since his return my brother has been in physical and emotional therapy. He is unable to shower in hot water, his nights are like day and day is like night. It is all the same to him. And since he came back, we have another mission -- to update him on everything that happened since he was imprisoned. He only learned from us for the first time that King Hussein had died, that Yitzhak Rabin had been assassinated and that the president of the US is now George Bush the son, and not the father, as when he was seized.

Masaad intends to relate one day the full story of what happened to him. He was never put on trial and no indictment was ever served against him. In fact, he ceased to exist on May 17, 1988, and only returned to life on December 13, 2001.