



Ayser al-Khaffaf Mother, Wife and Partner of an Iraqi Freedom Fighter (1933-2002). By Yasar Hasan

The following are glimpses from the life of Ayser Shake Suleiman al-Khaffaf.

Ayser al-Khafaff was born in the summer 1933.

She was well known for her good looks and was chosen a beauty queen whilst in middle school. She completed her pre-university schooling in Iraq and was one the few young women who won a scholarship from the Iraqi government to study in the UK. She pursued a degree in commerce at Manchester University. Her colleagues in the same year were Ibrahim Alawi and Fouad al-Amir.

While at university, she met another Iraqi student on a scholarship, Mohammed Salman Hasan. They met in one of his trips to meet Iraqi students in Manchester. They married eventually and she was with him whilst he was doing his DPhil at St Anthony College, Oxford.

While in England, she recalls a visit from a special envoy of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Sa'id, asking the young scholar Mohammed Salman Hasan, aged 28, to be Iraq's permanent representative in the UN. This offer was made in 1956 after firing him from his scholarship (1954), withdrawing his passport (1955) and requesting the British government to deport him - all this because of his radical political views. This offer was made after the Iraqi student's occupation of the Iraqi Embassy in Queen's Gate, London in which he played a central role. The occupation was in solidarity with Egypt and its people against the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt. He consulted his wife, Ayser, on the offer; she concluded that it is not morally right to accept such a dangled carrot to silence him. With dignified calm, he delivered the refusal to the envoy.¹ This example of uncompromising moral stand continued with her for the rest of her life.

Eventually, having graduated in 1958, both of them returned to Iraq prior to the revolution. Her husband, Mohammed Salman Hasan, DPhil Oxon, held one of the most prestigious qualifications. However, because of his radical views he could only be appointed at the Development Board

¹ For further details on my father and mother please refer to my paper "Prof. Dr Mohammed Salman Hasan: A Short Biography of a Pioneer Iraqi Economist. By Yasar Hasan," published by the Iraqi Economists Network:
<http://iraqieconomists.net/en/2014/09/21/prof-dr-mohammed-salman-hasan-a-short-biography-of-a-pioneer-iraqi-economist-by-yasar-hasan/>

as a temporary employee on a daily rate. She was appointed an accountant at Doura Refinery in Baghdad.

After the 14th July 1958 Revolution, Prime Minister Abdul Karim Qasim offered Dr Hasan a ministerial position but he apologised for declining this offer. In one of our conversations, he said that he told Qasim that although he can fulfil the duties of that position but having been away from the people for so long made it hard for him to assume such a public responsibility, which he always took seriously. He was then appointed secretary of Majlis al-Eimar (Development Board) and was allocated a government bungalow for a nominal rent in the Alwiyah area in central Baghdad, previously occupied by British government advisors. He was also privileged with a government car, registration number 3 Eimar.

She used to walk in the muddy path to get from our home to the main street to take the bus to go to work whilst she was heavily pregnant with me. Yet my father refused to drive her to work in the government car, though their offices were close. His view was that the car was connected to his work and it was not a family car; the privilege should not be abused. At best, he will drive her, on his way to work, to the bus stop.

She was active in the Iraqi Women's League along the founding leaders Naziha al-Duliami and Dr Salima al-Fakhri and many other leading woman lights in Iraq.²

Towards the end of Qasim's regime her husband wrote a controversial appeal signed by 32 top intellectuals of the country, demanding a human rights charter to enshrine the rights of the Iraqi people including the Kurds.

² Salam Ibrahim Kubba, "Oil Experts in Iraq are an Inexhaustible National Treasure: Dr Muhammad Salman Hasan as a Model," *al Thakafa al Jadida*, 368-369, September 2014, p 73.

In February 1963, whilst pregnant with her second son Ammar, Qasim issued an arrest warrant against her husband because of the appeal. Her husband was a very close friend of the late air force commander Jalal al-Awqati. He was aware of the Baathist coup attempt that is why the Baathists swiftly murdered him early in the early hours of the morning of 8th February 1963.³

In early February 1963, the elite pilots of Iraq were on practice led by Jalal. One of the pilots was Esmat Shake Suleiman Al Khaffaf, Ayser's brother, who did not perform to his usual faultless flying. He was stressed because of his sister's condition. Jalal asked Esmet why he has not told him that his sister had a difficult birth while Dr Hasan was engrossed in his work at Majlis al Eimar knowing that General Qasim will activate the arrest warrant against him. Dr Hasan was also under great stress and his message to his wife Ayser was that she was giving birth at the worst time for Iraq.

After the coup, both were sacked and Dr Hasan was sent to prison together with other members of Iraq's intellectual elite.

On reflection, Prof Hasan's imprisonment under the order of Qasim has saved him from certain death. Rumours suggest that Saddam tortured him and as a result, he lost his hearing.

They have just built a house in the Dawoudi area in Baghdad on a plot given to them by the Qasim government. Having lost their jobs and

³ One can argue that the Baathist coup was, in one way, a response to Dr Hasan's work on Law No. 80 on dispossessing the non-explored territorial concessions from the foreign oil companies.

having no income, a friend arranged for her to work as an accountant with Whinney Murray, a branch of a British chartered accountancy firm.

At this time, we were looked after by our grandmother Makkia al-Ani, daughter of the head of a tribe in Ana.

Prof Hasan was persecuted for belonging to the Communist Party and hence unemployable. He was cleared of this charge by court in 1965-66.

She supported her husband's attempt to win election to the presidency of the Iraqi Economists Society, which he lost.

She used to host and meet fellow intellectual families in mixed meetings, with both women and men discussing together various subjects from medicine to education to art to economics and politics.

In 1967-68, the couple borrowed money from her father, Shawket al-Khaffaf, to build her plot in Qadisiyah District in Baghdad before the government repossessed it. Because of their financial difficulties, Prof Hasan relented on not leaving Iraq and accepted a grade "A" appointment as a UN consultant in Kuwait.

She remained in Iraq looking after her house and children. On 17th July 1968, when a coup brought the Baathists back to power, President Baker sent after Prof Hasan in Kuwait to join the new government but he refused. However, he decided to return to Iraq. He was re-admitted to work for the government sector following the amnesty he demanded from Baker. So my parents returned to public sector employment - Prof Hasan to Baghdad University as lecturer and head of department and Ayser al-Khaffaf to Iraq Reinsurance Company (1968). My father was

forced into retirement by a Revolutionary Command Council decree in 1976; my mother followed him in the late 1970s.

They then struggled against Saddam's regime. He was imprisoned during the 1970s. Because of the torture, Prof Hasan has developed a kidney disease.

During these years, he was presidential advisor to Salim Rubies Ali, President of South Yemen, while Ayser was doing voluntary advisory work with the Women's League there. The work involved projects against early marriage at 12 and promotion of education of girls and women.

One of their pet projects was designing a scholarship system in Iraq, which to this day remains unimplemented. The system involved IQ tests. On passing the tests, students (from poor families) were to be offered scholarships to continue their studies. The project was inspired by the UK scholarship system to provide financial means to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue their university education.

In 1976, her daughter died from a mysterious illness. Later it was rumoured that her death was caused by induced meningitis.

In 1977, her eldest son was forced to leave Iraq, as he did not attain admission to a university. It was particularly hard to obtain a UK visa for him. He involved his father who was on a lecture tour in Oxford and Cambridge to seek assistance from the British ambassador to facilitate the granting of a visa for his son.

The youngest son, Ammar, had a brilliant engineering mind but decided to dedicate his life to medicine and plastic/cosmetic surgery. During the

Iran-Iraq war and while he was a medical student at Basrah University, he worked as a volunteer in local hospitals in Basrah. Eventually, he was operating on patients with his professors' approval. He won respect and admiration for this work down to his final year when he was practising neurosurgery.

In 1983, Ammar donated his kidney to his father who was in the UK undergoing treatment. Although he had a place in Oxford University to read medicine, he went back to Iraq in the vain hope that he can return later to do postgraduate studies in medicine. He was cruelly interrogated by Mohammed Hamza al-Zubaidie.⁴ He was told that his father was anti-revolutionary and asked what he thought of his father, to which his answer was that he was proud of his father.

Because of his defiance and independence, he was told to watch out. He was fatally wounded in a road accident, engineered by the regime, whilst he was eating outside a takeaway shop in Basrah. While in hospital, his death was completed by fellow doctors and students under strict orders from the Baathist authorities.

Ayser al Khaffaf, grief stricken, was anonymously advised to try to obtain information on his killer by making a motor insurance claim for her son's death. That way the insurance company would ascertain the person responsible for his death. The killer turned out to be an operative with the security establishment operating under a soldier's guise.⁵ The killer was prosecuted but without a final sentence being passed by the court.

⁴ Mohammed Hamza al-Zubaidie (1938-2005), a member of the Revolutionary Command Council and commander of the Central Euphrates military district. He came to fame with the brutal suppression of the 1991 uprising.

⁵ In his essay "Muhammad Salman Hasan: Militant, Intellectual and a Human Being," *al Thakafa al Jadida*, 368-369, September 2014, p 30, Dr Issam al-Khafaji made the following comment: "His mother Ayser al khaffaf walks downtown Basrah streets carrying a placard demanding justice for

She remained defiant while her husband was committed in 1983 to the Psychological and Psychiatric Hospital in Baghdad (known as Shammaiya Hospital), where he underwent various kinds of torture.

Government agents approached her many times, after his release from hospital, offering exile, which both of them declined. He started an open house university from his house.

Following Prof Hasan's death in 1989, she was in mourning for one year, and in 1990 whilst Saddam allowed travel to people who had relatives abroad, I managed to get her to London in 1990, prior to the Kuwaiti invasion. She was granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK.

She remained isolated and aloof with little involvement in Iraqi public issues in the UK. She tried to help women groups and worked with women suffering from family and other problems.

Following her family's interest in arts, she studied Chinese drawing and laced the same with Arabic letters. She also took an interest in sculpture.

She wore a black dress from 1976 as a gesture of defiance against the status quo. Although she had vowed to wear a red dress and dance in the street upon the fall of Saddam's regime she did not get her wish.⁶ She died in London, a broken woman, on 16th July 2002.

her son after being executed by a truck with a distinctive mukhabart number plate which rode over the pavement and killed him in front of many witnesses."

⁶ However, the way Iraq has descended into chaos since 2003, she would not have been best pleased or would have accepted the new religious rules imposed post-occupation. She was the lifetime

London 27 October 2014

comrade and bearer of Prof Hasan's modernist message, his draft constitution for Iraq and all his radical thoughts dedicated to the empowerment of the poor, including women, and transformation of their beloved Iraq into the first world.
