

Through War, Explosions, and Resettlement: I Kept My Hope by Farhad Othman

I come from a village near Afrin, in the northwestern part of Syria. It's a beautiful place, nestled among olive trees and hills, where life was simple and rooted in tradition. My early years were spent in a small village school, just five classrooms for all the children. My earliest memories are of the New Year's celebration, which occurs on March 21st of every year. I still look back fondly on these days—families gathering, music playing, food being shared, and everyone dressed in traditional clothes. We danced, lit fires, and welcomed the spring together. It was a time of joy and connection with the other members of my community.

I am very proud of my Kurdish heritage because we are a people who believe in peace, dignity, and respect. We believe women have rights—that they should be educated, independent, and equal. We respect different religions and ways of life. Being Kurdish means treating others with humanity, no matter who they are or where they come from. It's not about how you dress or what you say you believe—it's about how you live and how you treat others. We value honesty, family, and freedom. Even when we're denied rights or recognition, we hold onto our values and live by them.

My story began long before I was born. My parents had an arranged marriage. My father was in love with someone else. My mother, only fourteen at the time, was the messenger—literally the one delivering letters from my father to the young woman he loved. Then, the families stepped in. They insisted he marry my mother. He didn't want to. He didn't even show up to the wedding. But the celebration went on without him. My mother danced, confused and too young to understand fully what was happening. At the time, she probably only knew that she was now someone's wife.

After ten years, my brother was born. He was the first. My parents had prayed, gone to doctors, even visited mosques hoping for a child. Their prayers were finally answered. After him, the rest of us followed. There are four of us in total—two brothers and two sisters. We were a family of six living in one small home, always adjusting to what life threw at us.

My father had spent time in the Syrian military, but only briefly. After that, he worked in hookah lounges, preparing and managing the hookahs for customers. It was steady work, but not always nearby. He often had to live away from us, coming home only on his days off. I grew up mostly with my mother—we were very close. She was the center of our world. I missed my father a lot. We all did. We wished he could be with us more, but that kind of life just wasn't possible back then.

When I was seven, we moved to Aleppo so I could attend a better school. Life in the city was different—louder, faster, more chaotic. But it was exciting too. I liked learning. I was curious. I wanted to understand the world.

Then the war got worse. When I was ten, my father left for Lebanon to find work. There were no jobs left in Syria—the economy had collapsed, and people were either fleeing or struggling to survive. My family moved back to Afrin, hoping it would be safer than Aleppo. We stayed with my grandmother, my father's mother. Her house was larger and could fit all of us.

My father spent a year in Lebanon alone before he sent for us. The journey from Syria to Lebanon is something I'll never forget. We rode in an old blue van, past bombed-out roads and buildings. At one point, a bomb exploded moments after we had driven past. We could have died. That's something you carry with you—the knowledge that life or death is often a matter of seconds.

We then took a bus to Lebanon. There were checkpoints everywhere, and soldiers would get on and check everyone's IDs. I was so scared during that trip—I didn't know if they would take my father, or my mother, or all of us off the bus. They didn't need a reason. If they thought you were connected to the opposition, or if they just didn't like your name, they could pull you off. Being Kurdish made it even more dangerous. My father's name sounded more Arab than Kurdish, which helped. But often, just speaking our dialect was enough to attract suspicion. We said nothing when the soldiers boarded the bus.

Kurds in Syria were denied identity cards under the Assad regime, especially during Hafez al-Assad's time. Many of us had no citizenship, no legal recognition, and few rights. We couldn't work certain jobs, we couldn't move freely, and we were always being watched. On that bus, I held my breath at every checkpoint, praying we'd be allowed to stay on and keep going.

We arrived in Lebanon and settled in Beirut. It became our home for the next ten years. My father managed to get legal papers for us through UNICEF, which allowed me to attend school and for us to move freely within the country. That was rare. Most Syrian refugees in Lebanon lived in fear of being stopped, questioned, or worse. Especially if you were Kurdish.

When I arrived in Lebanon, I couldn't speak Arabic at all. I had grown up with a completely different language. I was placed in a 4th grade classroom with kids much younger than me, and it was difficult and embarrassing at first. But I worked hard. Over time, I picked up both Arabic and English. In Lebanon, the education system expected students to be fluent in both. Eventually, I spoke Arabic so well that people sometimes thought I was Lebanese. It helped me get by in a country where being Syrian often meant facing discrimination.

When I was eighteen, I started working my first job as an HVAC technician. During the summers, I climbed onto rooftops to fix air conditioners. The work was hard and dangerous, but

I needed to help my family. My father had lost his job after COVID shut down the restaurant industry. He was in his fifties, and no one wanted to hire him. So, my income largely supported the family.

Then came the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020. That day, I was on the rooftop of a building, working alone on an AC unit. Just before the blast, the power was switched from public to private—something that happened often in Lebanon. I went downstairs to check on the unit from below. That’s what saved me. The restaurant windows had been left open for cleaning. When the explosion hit, the pressure blew everything apart. The chandelier above me came crashing down and struck my arm. Glass tore into me from wrist to shoulder. I was lucky. Others weren’t.

Outside, the streets were filled with smoke, shattered glass, flipped cars, and bleeding people. When we got to the hospital, I saw a man with glass embedded from his feet all the way to his scalp. My mother was injured too. She had been cooking at home when the pressure blast reached our neighborhood. A hard plastic object hit her in the head, and the hot oil she was using spilled across the kitchen. Somehow, she escaped serious burns.

That explosion marked the beginning of Lebanon’s total collapse. The currency tanked. Jobs vanished. Prices soared. Rent was \$100 a month. I was making \$90. We were sinking.

That’s when UNICEF contacted my father. They asked if we would be willing to resettle as refugees. He said yes. We went through interviews, medical exams, background checks. Eventually, IOM—the International Organization for Migration—told us we’d been accepted to go to America. We didn’t know where in America. Just that we were going.

Our flight was scheduled for September 26, 2023, but got delayed. We flew out on October 4, the day after my twentieth birthday.

We landed in Chicago. RefugeeOne met us at the airport, gave us a place to live, helped us with papers and ESL classes. It was overwhelming, but we were finally somewhere safe. I was the only one in my family who knew English, so I helped translate and guide them.

Life here is better, but it's still hard. We worry about money. My father feels useless not working. My brother carries a heavy load. I try to focus on my studies. But here, at least, I can dream. I can walk down the street without being stopped for who I am. I can go to school. I can build a future. I am not discriminated against because I'm Syrian. I'm not denied an identity. My group is not invisible.

My sister, however, is still in Lebanon. She got married there and has three children. We were very close growing up—she lived with us most of her life. Even though she has her own family now, I still miss her every day. We talk often, but it's not the same. I worry about her and the kids, especially with how hard life has become in Lebanon. When we left, we hoped someday she could join us. Until then, we just wait and stay in touch as best we can.

I'm studying biology in college now. My goal is to become a doctor. It's not easy balancing work, school, and family responsibilities, but I stay focused. Education is something I never take for granted, especially after everything we went through just to have this chance.

I come from a history of loss, survival, and migration. I carry the weight of war, the memories of glass in my skin, and the sound of bombs behind me. But I also carry hope. Nothing has been easy, but I keep going. I smile. I show up. I carry what I've been through, but I don't let it define me. What defines me is what I do now, and what I'm building—for myself, and for the people I love.