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Childhood lost: ‘Sometimes I feel like time has stopped’



Shayma Assaad, 22, is now a mother of four, after being brought to Syria by her family as a teen.

By **ELLEN WHINNETT**

12:00AM JULY 16, 2022

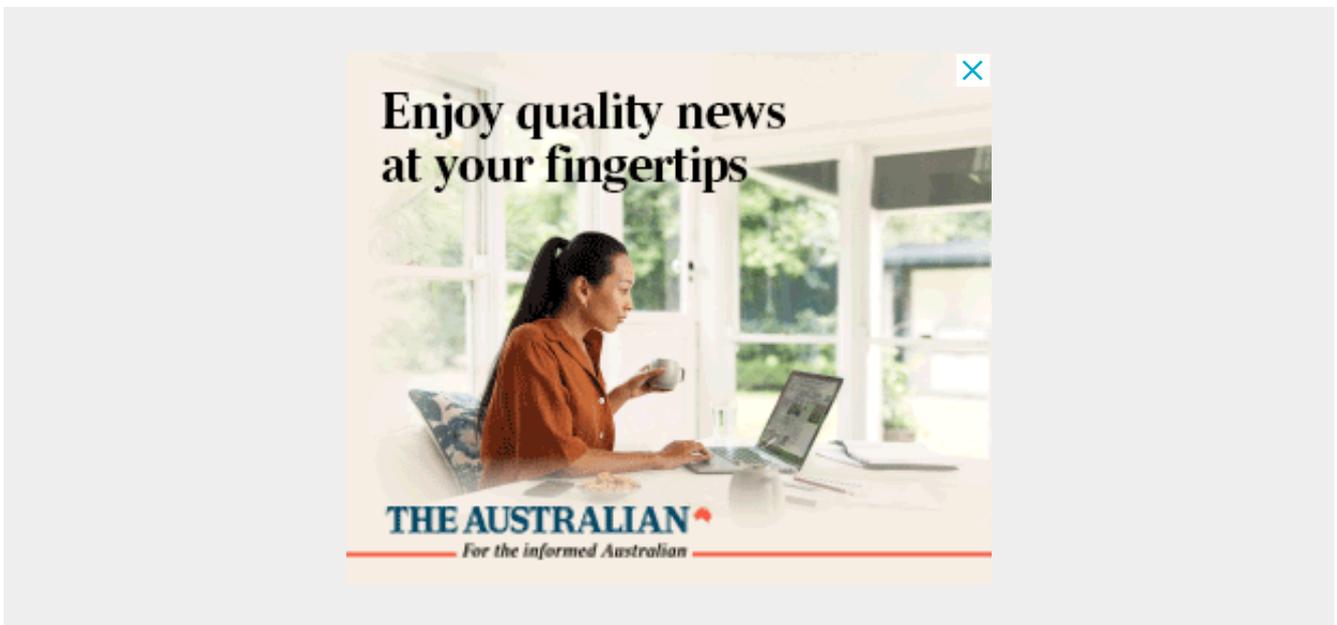
Shayma Assaad was 15 years old when her parents took her and her two little sisters from Sydney to Syria.

There, she found herself living in Raqqa, the Syrian capital of the Islamic

State caliphate, where she was “married” to a Sydney man seven years older than her, and had her first baby at the age of 16.

Now 22, she has four children, and has spent the past three years detained in the prison camps housing Islamic State families in the desert in northeastern Syria.

She tries to describe a future for her family, and tells how she struggled to homeschool her children in a tent, given she had barely finished Year 9 in high school before she was taken from Australia.



“It’s actually really hard,” she tells The Weekend Australian in an interview on a 44C day inside the al-Roj camp in Kurdish-controlled Syria, near the Iraqi border.





The Al-Roj camp in Syria

“Sometimes I feel like time has stopped. Living in a 4 x 4 tent and your child waking up in the night telling you he can’t breathe from the heat, that’s actually really hard.

“And I can’t really let them outside because this is the only sort of shade we have,” she says, gesturing to the metre or so of shade cast by the cement wall of a tiny communal kitchen.

The plight of Shayma Assaad is one of the most troubling of the group of women and children held in al-Roj camp. She was just a child herself when she was taken to Syria, and now has four children under seven: sons Alaa, 6, Dawood, 5, Umayr, 4, and little Mariam, 3, who was born in the camp and has never taken a step outside her wire compound.

Her husband, former Sydney tradie Mohammed Noor Masri, is in prison several hours away in Hasakah, where he has been held incommunicado for more than three years.

Her mother Bessima and little sisters Assya, 15, and Maysa, 12, are in the tent next door. All were taken into custody by the Syrian

Democratic Forces at Baghouz in
March 2019.

Her father Ahmad Assaad is in
prison near Hasakah. He has
previously claimed he only took
the family to Syria in an effort to
rescue two of his sons, and that they inadvertently became “stuck” in
Islamic State territory.

Ms Assaad's husband, former tradie Mohammed Noor
Masri, left Sydney to join Islamic State in 2016.

Ms Assaad, 151cm tall, emotional and in tears as she speaks, told how her
youngest child, three-year-old daughter Mariam, was born at the
notoriously dangerous al-Hol camp, near Hasakah.

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“Mariam was born in the camp, in Hol. She was actually born in a tent, not
a hospital. She was born two o'clock in the morning in a tent with no
doctor support at all,” Ms Assaad said.

“We had a neighbour, she had a bit of experience with delivering children,
she was our only hope. We had to actually ask her for help so she came to
my rescue.”

The Australian families were moved to the safer al-Roj camp two years ago,
in the Syrian oilfields in a remote part of the country close to the Iraqi
border.

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In winter it freezes and snow falls on their tent, which is heated with a kerosene heater. In summer, it routinely hits more than 45C during the day.

“It’s actually a risk for them to stay in the tent because fires are caused by electricity,” Ms Assaad said of her children.

“It is also a risk of them going out in the sun and burning. As you can see, my daughter’s turned black from the sun. The days here are actually really long, hard. You have to struggle for water. Every 48 tents there’s a fence, as you can see. Schooling is hard as well because children get scared to go to school.”

The Australians largely keep their children out of the rudimentary school on the other side of al-Roj camp and try to teach them in their tents.

“It’s what we give them, what I teach my sons ... how to read,” Ms Assaad said.

“I barely knew. I left school at Year 9. I didn’t even start Year 10 when I left school.”

Like other occupants of the camp, Ms Assaad gets a two-minute window once a week to send messages to Australia via a WhatsApp messaging service monitored by the camp administration.

Shayma Assaad’s four young children Alaa, 6, Dawood, 5, Umayr, 4, and Mariam, 3. Picture: Ellen Whinnett/The Australian

“I would really love to go back to Australia. I want my kids to get a better education, to live like a normal child. To know what life is beyond the fences,” she said.

Asked if she posed a threat to the people of Australia, she replied: “No, of course not!

“I want to study again, I want to finish my education. One thing I regret is not finishing, not being able to finish my education. I would have been able to give my kids more than I gave them.

“For them, everything they missed out on, I want them to have. A normal childhood, the education, going to the park, the circus, going to the movie, everything a kid would love to do. Going to a shopping centre and being able to buy what they want.”

She asked the Australian government to consider that “every day that we spend here, we can never get back. I want them to have mercy on us and the children,” she said.

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