

THE WAITING LIST

Addressing the immediate and long-term needs of victims of explosive weapons in Syria.

Farah's testimony

Farah* walked through the school gates calling happily to her best friend, Haneen, who lived on the far side of the river that split their neighbourhoods. The children hadn't seen each other over the weekend, as Farah had stayed home to help her mother prepare her little brother's birthday party. Farah's little brother could not remember a birthday before the war. Together with her four sisters, Farah had raised her voice singing "Happy Birthday," trying to drown out the distant rumble of the fighting. She had saved a chocolate bonbon from the party for Haneen, and was looking forward to seeing her friend's eyes widen at the rare treat.

Kareem was relaxing at home, playing with his two young sons after a long day in the hospital. For the last three years, Kareem had volunteered as an informal ambulance driver in the city, and when explosions rocked the nearby neighbourhoods, he would sprint to the family car and drive toward the chaos, following the smoke spiralling above the rooftops. He would help those well enough to walk into the back of his car, then race them through the streets to the local hospital emergency room. The sight of Kareem's battered red Toyota came to signal the start of a busy shift for staff in the emergency department. That day, his afternoon was cut short when a number of shells hit Farah's school.

When he arrived at the scene of the bombed school, Kareem found a group of young girls, no older than 10 or 11, scattered on the ground. Farah was still breathing as he lifted her into the back seat of his car, alongside two other injured children and a teacher. With the help of another volunteer, he carefully lifted the lifeless bodies of Farah's classmates into the trunk of the car. Taking care not to catch Haneen's bloodstained uniform, he carefully



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closed the trunk before driving toward the hospital. If he drove fast enough, he thought, maybe the girl would survive.

In the hospital, the surgeon removed the thin, sharp piece of shrapnel that had severed Farah's spinal cord just above the level of the waistband where she had tucked Haneen's bon bon. He wondered how to break the news to the family that, although their daughter had survived, she would likely never walk again.

“ In the first days, Farah's physical and health situation was extremely difficult. I didn't have any idea that her injury was so severe or dangerous. I have faith and hope that God willing, someday she will walk again on her own two feet, and this is the only hope that encourages me.

Many things have changed and become different. Her brothers and sisters changed so many things like their going out, their way of dressing, and even [hide] their happiness so as not to hurt Farah's feelings... We were suffering and so tired so that we could put a smile on Farah's face. I mean, as for me personally, my entire life was turned upside-down, just for being the legs for my daughter.”

Farah's mother, Fatima

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After multiple surgeries and weeks of Farah's mother sitting by her bedside while trying to make sure her other four children were taken care of at home, the hospital physiotherapist came to fit Farah for her wheelchair. The physiotherapist knew the story of the explosion at the school, and spoke in a gentle voice as he explained how to fold and unfold the chair, how to work its brakes and complete a tight turn. At first, Farah's mother found it hard to accept the chair and clung to her hope that Farah would walk again, just like before the accident.

Tears welled in Farah's mother's eyes as she watched the physiotherapist teaching Farah how to adjust to her new life. There were many complicated routines to master – regularly using her arms to shift her weight so that potentially deadly pressure sores would not develop, ensuring the tubes of the catheter did not tangle in the spokes of the wheel, learning how to safely help Farah off the ground if she were to fall from the chair. Farah noticed her mother's face crumple as she watched her, and fixed her own face in a determined smile as she completed her therapy sessions, even as her arms trembled from lifting her weight in ways she was not used to.

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At first, the situation was so difficult for me that in every single word Farah was saying or every single move she was doing, I was crying. A child daughter in the early stages of her life becomes disabled? I know how much Farah loves life, and I had hoped for her to live her life with all it has to be experienced.

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Farah's mother, Fatima

Six months after the accident, Farah was finally able to return to school, her classroom relocated to a ground-floor room on the opposite side of the building from where the mortar had blown out the windows. The pain of her therapy sessions, and the worry in her parents' voices as they murmured over her hospital bed, soon receded as her friends excitedly took turns wheeling her along the corridors at break time. However, the wheelchair that the family could afford was not well suited to the needs of an active young girl, and one wheel soon broke, leaving Farah once again stranded at home until funds could be found to repair the chair.

Farah's mother reflected on the financial pressures and emotional burden of trying to meet the needs resulting from her daughter's impairment:

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I am suffering a lot and very tired from daily life and all its requirements, including [Farah's] education and other needs. A huge part of it is because of Farah's injury. My family is composed of 5 girls and a boy. The youngest boy is only 10 years old, and the only financial resources we have are the father's salary, which is not enough. The daily life requirements are a lot – too much and increasing, especially since all of them are attending school. Frankly speaking, there are many things I deny myself and the kids in order to be able to provide Farah with the minimum items she requires, whether she's in need of medicine, or diapers.

Farah's mother, Fatima

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Despite the challenges, Farah had this to say about returning to school after the accident that killed her friend Haneen, her classmates, and her teacher:

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I would love to carry on with my education, and I don't want to leave my school. But because of the difficulties of taking me to the school I might leave it and not continue my education. I hope to remain in my school and with my schoolmates. ... I wish and I wish to find a solution.

Farah ”

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*Names have been changed to protect the identities of the story tellers.

