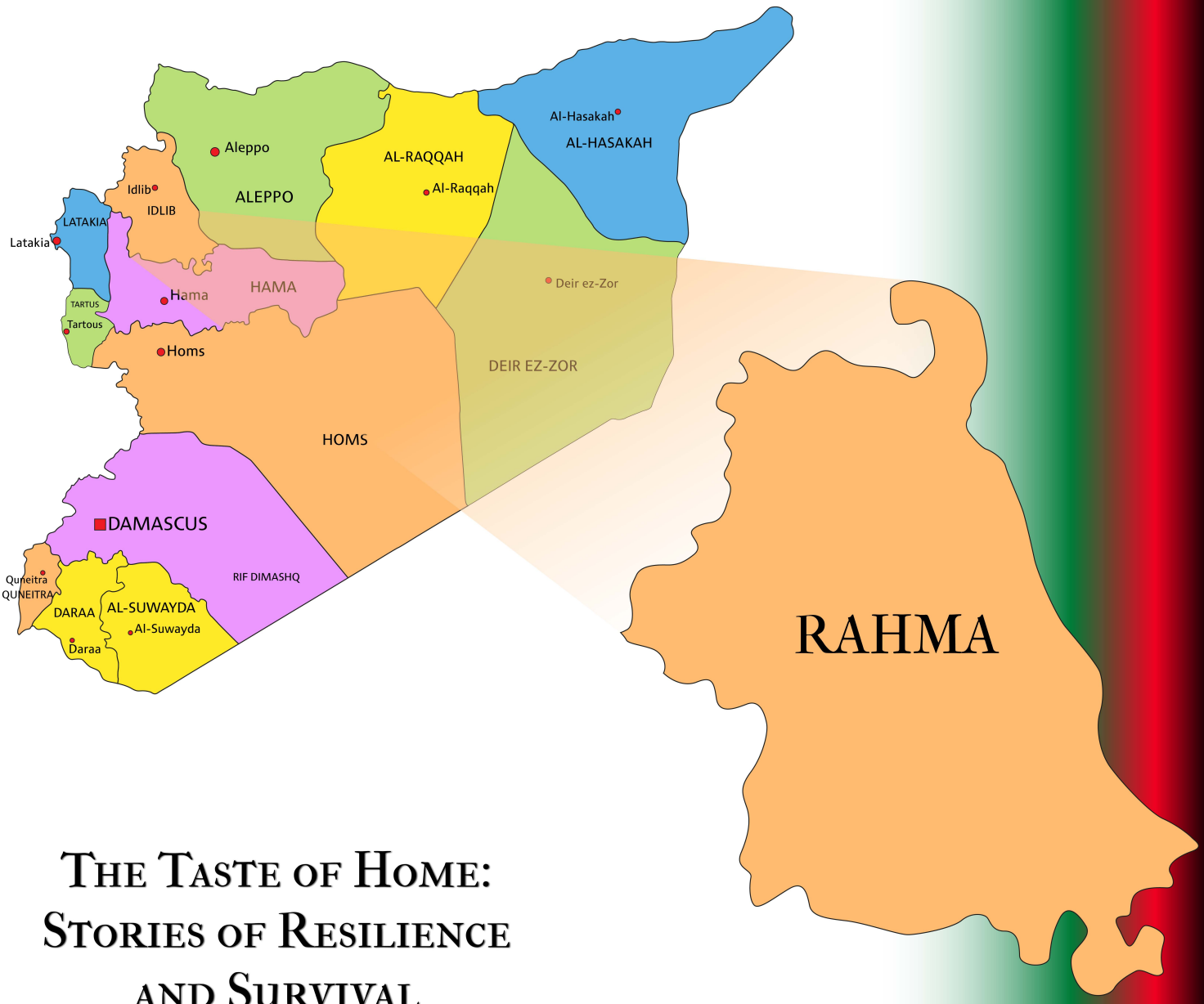

The Taste of Home: Stories of Resilience and Survival

Executive Producer: Mirela Barbu

Host: Sarah Burhan

Project Manager: Prof Martin Spinelli

Outreach Manager: Dr Shaher Abdullateef

Sound Engineer: Eng Zuhier Agha

Web Designer: Ruth Holroyd

Translator: Asmaa Shehadeh

This podcast series is part of the project Harvesting Hope: Integrating Technology, Heritage, and Women's Voices in Syrian Agriculture, supported by a grant from the International Development Challenges Fund (2024-25).

The Taste of Home: Stories of Resilience and Survival

Sarah: Hello, dear listeners. I hope you're all doing well. Welcome to a new episode of *From Heart to Hearth.* I'm your host, Sarah Burhan, and today's episode is sponsored by the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye, in collaboration with the University of Sussex in the UK. Our episode is titled ***The Taste of Home: Stories of Resilience and Survival****.* Joining us today is Rahma Hussein, originally from Maarrat al-Nu'man in Idlib Governorate. Since 2019, she has been living in Idlib. Rahma, welcome! We're so happy to have you with us today. Let's start by getting to know you - tell us a little about yourself.

Rahma: Thank you, Sarah. I'm really happy to be here. I'm a Syrian woman from Maarrat al-Nu'man. By profession, I'm a lawyer, and I used to work throughout Idlib province. In recent years, however, my work has shifted. I now work as a legal consultant for non-governmental civil society organisations.

Sarah: You also mentioned earlier that you are a mother.

Rahma: Yes, I'm a mother of four children. One of them has autism, and he has grown up in extremely difficult circumstances - amidst the revolution and displacement. Balancing my professional life with caring for my children has been a challenge, especially with my son, who has autism. He requires additional care, including a special diet. His meals need to be prepared in a specific way, so I cook separately for him from what I prepare for the rest of the family.

Sarah: Tell us about some of your fondest memories of Maarrat al-Nu'man.

Rahma: Maarrat al-Nu'man is truly special - a city known for its warmth and kindness. It is often called *the mother of the poor* because life there was simple, and the people were generous, and always willing to share what little they had. I have so many beautiful memories, especially of family gatherings - whether during Eid, weddings, or even casual visits with neighbours.

With Ramadan approaching, I find myself thinking a lot about Eid in Maarrat al-Nu'man. Every Eid I've spent in displacement has felt different. I hope that this year, even if we can't return permanently due to the destruction, we'll at least be able to visit

- to reunite with loved ones and revive old traditions. Eid just isn't the same when you're away from home.

One of our most cherished Eid traditions is visiting the graves of our loved ones early in the morning. After that, the entire family gathers at the home of the eldest - whether the father, grandfather or even great-grandfather. A family-wide Eid breakfast is a tradition, usually around 8 a.m., right after Eid prayers. It's usually the grandmother who wakes at dawn to start preparing the meal, ensuring everything is ready before the family returns from the mosque and cemetery.

Sarah: What kind of dishes would typically be served during Eid, in Maarrat al-Nu'man or Idlib more broadly?

Rahma: During Eid, we prepare a variety of dishes. One of the main dishes was turkey, traditionally cooked in a large pot rather than a pressure cooker. Another special dish is *arman*, made with yoghurt, meat on the bone, and safflower, which gives it a beautiful golden colour. It's different from *shakriya* [another yoghurt-based dish widely common in Syria]; the main distinction is in the seasoning. *Shakriya* is made with dried mint and sometimes cooked with onions, whereas *arman* is flavoured with safflower. If Eid falls in winter, dried beans are also commonly prepared.

Sarah: When the grandmother prepares the Eid dishes, does she do everything on her own, or does she receive help?

Rahma: It's customary for the grandmother to begin preparing lunch ingredients right after the Fajr prayer. She starts by boiling the meat or turkey, soaking the rice, washing the *freekeh*, and handling other preparations. As the sun rises, her daughters-in-law usually start arriving to help.

Sarah: Aside from Eid, what are some common dishes prepared for other occasions?

Rahma: Our region is known for several traditional dishes. One of the most famous is *lahm bi ajeen* [thin flatbreads topped with a spiced minced meat mixture], which is known as *sfiha* in other regions. The filling is made with minced meat, finely chopped onion, yoghurt, and pomegranate molasses. We would then send it to the bakery, where it would be spread onto thin rounds of dough and baked.

More recently, as food habits have changed, some people have started making a vegetable-based version. In the past, we never made it this way, but now, instead of yoghurt and pomegranate molasses, a mixture of tomatoes and red peppers is used to create a larger quantity of filling.

Sarah: What has caused this shift in food culture and the practice of mixing meat with vegetables?

Rahma: People's eating habits have changed due to a combination of factors. The displacement of communities from different regions has led to a blending of food traditions. At the same time, purchasing power has declined significantly. Many have had no choice but to adapt. This is why chicken is now often used instead of lamb when making *lahm bi ajeen* - it's simply more affordable. Adding vegetables to traditional dishes also helps stretch the meal, making a larger portion with lower costs.

Cultural exchange through displacement has also played a role. In some areas, *lahm bi ajeen* has traditionally been made with a mix of meat and vegetables. Even in my region, some people never liked the classic style made with yoghurt and pomegranate molasses. When they tried the vegetable-based version, they found it more appealing and adopted it.

Another well-known dish in Idlib and its countryside is *kebab bil karaz* [grilled meatballs cooked in a sour cherry sauce]. It is made with *vişne*, a small, tart variety of cherry grown locally in Ariha. We juice the cherries, boil the juice, then add grilled meatballs to the sauce.

This dish is also popular in Aleppo. In the past, Aleppans would travel to Ariha during the *vişne* season to buy large quantities, as Ariha was famous for its cultivation. They would preserve the cherries to make *kebab bil karaz* throughout the year, not just when the fruit was in season.

Another well-known dish in Idlib and its countryside is *kebab bil karaz* [grilled meatballs cooked in a sour cherry sauce]. It is made using sour cherries, a fruit similar to typical cherries but much smaller and extremely tart, known as *vişne* in Turkish and locally in Ariha. The sour cherries are juiced, then boiled, before adding grilled meatballs to the sauce.

This dish is also widely enjoyed in Aleppo. In the past, Aleppans would travel to Ariha during *vişne* season to buy large quantities, as Ariha was renowned for its cherry cultivation. They would preserve the fruit to make *kebab bil karaz* throughout the year, not just when it was in season.

Another traditional dish we prepare is *kibbeh nayyeh* [bulgur balls mixed with lean meat], though our version differs from that of Idlib city. There, it is made with finely pounded, lean raw lamb mixed with bulgur, onion, and spices. It is then shaped into small balls, neatly arranged on a plate, and served garnished with chopped parsley.

In Ma’arrat al-Nu’man, however, we don’t eat raw meat - we’re not fond of it. Instead, we knead soaked bulgur by hand with olive oil, fresh tomatoes, finely chopped onion, and several spices, including cumin, which we intentionally add to aid digestion. The mixture is then shaped into small balls and served with a sprinkle of dried mint.

The process in Ma’arrat al-Nu’man is entirely manual - we knead the bulgur with oil and the other ingredients using our hands, repeatedly coating them with oil as we knead until the bulgur reaches the right texture. We don’t use any electric equipment to grind it.

Another variation of this dish includes *muhammara* [a spread made from dried red peppers]. The dried peppers are finely chopped, soaked in water, and mixed with pomegranate molasses and spices. Sometimes, a bit of sautéed onion is added before incorporating it into the *kibbeh* mixture.

We brought this method with us when we were displaced to Idlib city, and the locals there quickly grew to love it. Given the worsening financial situation, they found it particularly practical. Although they had not been displaced, they, too, were affected by the hardships of the war. The number of people who fled to Idlib far exceeded the city’s capacity and resources, putting immense strain on the area. Moreover, the agricultural lands owned by Idlib’s residents fell under the control of regime forces, preventing landowners from accessing, cultivating, or benefiting from them. Idlib’s people have traditionally relied on olive farming and olive oil production, alongside figs and seasonal vegetables, as their primary sources of livelihood.

Sarah: You also mentioned *kawaj*.

Rahma: Yes, we have *kawaj*, sometimes called *saba' douwal* [literally "seven nations"], because it traditionally includes seven different vegetables - courgettes, aubergines, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, and green beans, along with meat. These were its essential ingredients in the past.

However, like many other dishes, it has changed due to rising prices and the unavailability of certain vegetables. Now, it's made with whatever is available - sometimes just two vegetables, such as potatoes and squash. Meat has also become optional; when available, chicken is used instead of lamb. Some people even prepare it without any meat, using ghee or oil for richness. To reduce costs further, tomato paste is often used instead of fresh tomatoes.

For most families, the priority has shifted from maintaining traditional recipes to simply ensuring there is a meal on the table. Cooking culture has changed significantly - it's now about making do with what's available and adapting as needed. In the past, if an ingredient was missing, the dish simply wouldn't be made; now, it's about ensuring food is provided to the children, with whatever is at hand.

As a working mother, my biggest challenge with cooking is balancing my time between work and preparing meals. On top of that, I also have to make special dishes for my son, who has autism. His diet is different from that of his siblings, so I prepare his meals at night to ensure his food is ready in the morning in case he gets hungry while I'm away; that way, his siblings can help him.

I prepare most of the family's meals either in the morning before heading out or the night before if it's a dish that takes a long time to make - like *mahshi*. I simply don't have enough time in the morning before work to prepare it, as it involves hollowing, stuffing, rolling *warak enab*, and carefully arranging everything in the pot. When we have a fridge, I store the prepared dish inside; if there's no fridge or electricity, I leave the food in the cold air.

Thank God, we have electricity now. Three years ago, I lived in an area where there was no electricity or even access to generator subscriptions. In places where *amperat* [generator subscriptions] are available, people can at least pay for a limited supply of 1 or 2 amperes to have basic lighting. But in that area where I was living, there was nothing—it was completely dark at night. I had to rely on a small generator, which I could only afford to run for an hour and a half to two hours a day at most. In that short

time, I had to complete many essential tasks - doing the laundry, pumping water, carrying out any cooking tasks that required electricity, and handling other household chores. The time was always tight.

As a working woman, I usually prepare time-consuming dishes the night before or save them for my day off - I can't cook them on a workday. In general, I try to do as much as I can early in the morning - soaking rice, chopping vegetables, and preparing ingredients - so that when I return home, everything is ready to go straight onto the stove.

Work has also affected the timing of our meals. I leave home at eight in the morning and don't return before four in the afternoon. By the time I finish the final steps of cooking, it's already late, and we end up having lunch much later than usual - around six o'clock. Ramadan is especially exhausting for me, particularly when it falls in winter, as the short daylight hours make it difficult to prepare everything in time for *iftar*. That's why I'm thinking of mostly cooking dishes that can be prepared the night before.

I don't have the financial means to rely on takeaway meals or hire a cook, as some working women in better situations do. Instead, I prepare food the night before or cook in larger quantities so it lasts for two days - it's more economical, and home-cooked food is always better and tastier. Many working women do the same. Those who are better off either hire a woman to come and cook in their home or order home-cooked meals prepared elsewhere and delivered to them. But for me, that's simply not an option financially.

Sarah: You raised several important points on how Syrian cooking traditions have evolved, both for those who were displaced and for those who remained due to the war and its aftermath. With limited resources and rising prices, people have had to adapt. Many have turned to chicken, using different cuts and marinades as a substitute for lamb, which was once a staple in Syrian cuisine.

Rahma: That's true. In the past, at a traditional butcher's you'd find red meat as the standard; chicken was sold only for specific dishes traditionally made with it or for people with medical conditions that prevented them from consuming red meat. But over time, chicken began replacing lamb in many recipes.

Now, you'll find butchers specialising in pre-seasoned and variety of chicken cuts for specific dishes - diced chicken for *shakriyeh*, which was originally made with lamb; marinated chicken for *shish tawook*; finely minced chicken for *kawaj*; and sliced chicken for *shawarma*, *zinger*, and other popular dishes. These pre-prepared cuts weren't available before, but now they're everywhere.

In the past, we used to buy these meals ready-made from restaurants, but with rising costs, many families now prepare them at home. Cooking at home ensures that everyone gets enough to eat, whereas a single restaurant sandwich is often not filling, and buying enough to feel full can be too expensive. Moreover, home-cooked meals bring the family together - everyone sits down to eat, makes sandwiches, and shares food, strengthening family bonds.

As a result, butchers specialising in different types of chicken have become as common as traditional lamb butchers. At the same time, fast-food restaurants have multiplied, catering to those who can afford them. But for many, restaurant meals are no longer an option. Society has become starkly divided - on one side, extreme wealth, and on the other, extreme poverty. The middle class has all but disappeared. This is one of the many ways the war has reshaped Syrian society.

Sarah: Yes, unfortunately, this economic divide has only grown wider, and tragically, the number of people struggling to afford basic necessities keeps increasing.

Rahma: Exactly. I've been talking mainly about those living in urban areas, but the situation in the displacement camps is far more severe. Families there have lost their cooking traditions entirely. Most of their meals consist of rice or boiled bulgur - just enough to keep their children fed for the day. Usually, they prepare one late lunch, which is eaten again for dinner if there's anything left. There's no variety, no way to prepare different dishes. Even when they can access vegetables through farm work, they cook them without meat, oil, or ghee because they simply can't afford them. Many displaced people in the camps work as labourers in agricultural fields, typically for a daily wage that is supposed to be around 40 TRY. In reality, they receive only 20 TRY in cash, with the rest paid in set quantities of tomatoes, aubergines, etc. As a result, families rely on these vegetables, cooking them with whatever other ingredients they have. They prepare *mahshi* [stuffed vegetables], but without any meat or chicken—just to have something to eat. For them, cooking is no longer about tradition or flavour;

it is purely about survival, especially after the recent suspension of aid. Their situation has become increasingly desperate.

The food culture we talked about earlier still exists for those living in houses, whereas in the camps, people have almost nothing. They get by on whatever they can find, often just a single, plain meal - boiled grains or vegetables, whatever is available. It's heartbreaking. Cooking is no longer about tradition or taste; it's simply about having something to eat.

I once visited a woman in her tent who had a goat she milked. She made *roz bil laban* [rice pudding] for her children, but she had no sugar - only salt. I couldn't bring myself to eat it. Just imagine how much food traditions have changed - not out of choice, but because there's no other option.

It's hard to put into words how deep their suffering runs. I see it every day, and it's devastating. All I can hope is that one day, these families will be able to go home and start over - even if that just means planting a small garden, growing their own food, regaining some control over their lives. Anything would be better than what they've now. If they can return to work, maybe they'll manage to earn enough to afford meat again, even if only once a week. For many, going home is the only way forward, especially as rent prices keep rising beyond reach; while in their hometowns, most people owned their homes and never had to worry about rent. I just hope things get better, that opportunities return, and that Syria, in time, can be rebuilt.

Sarah: It's truly heartbreaking to hear how cooking traditions have changed for the displaced - not just in terms of replacing key ingredients, like lamb with chicken, or limiting meals to whatever vegetables are available, but also in terms of the complete loss of culinary heritage for those forced to live in camps; as you've described earlier, for many, cooking has become merely a struggle for survival.

Rahma: Yes, and even the way people cook has changed. In the camps, makeshift cooking methods have become the norm. Many use metal sheets fitted with battery-powered fans to ignite firewood, as gas is unaffordable. In the city, gas cylinders have become so expensive that most families now buy gas in small amounts - only as much as they can afford at a time - and rely on filling small portable canisters for cooking. Those with slightly better financial means use single-burner electric stoves, but because they can only cook one dish at a time, they have to prepare meals in stages.

People have lost the ability to live as they once did. Multi-burner stoves and traditional ground-level cooking setups have all but disappeared. Even food preservation, once a deeply rooted practice, has been largely disrupted.

In the past, families stocked their homes with essential supplies, carefully preparing for the year ahead. Every spring, they preserved large quantities of cheese made from sheep's milk - enough to last an entire year. Now, people can only afford to buy what they need for the day, stretching every coin to cover their most immediate needs, often just a single meal at a time. The same goes for staples like sugar, rice, oil, and ghee.

This shift has been especially devastating for rural families who has been left without access to their land due to displacement; they once relied on the harvest season to secure their food supplies for the entire year. They are among those hit the hardest, as they were accustomed to having an abundance of essential ingredients - oil, ghee, rice, and more - stocked or prepared well in advance to last through the year.

We also used to freeze vegetables for the winter, as fresh produce was scarce during those months, limited to greens like Swiss chard, cabbage, cauliflower, and potatoes. To ensure variety, we would preserve summer vegetables for later use. But now, with little to no access to reliable electricity, freezing is no longer an option. Instead, people have reverted to drying methods, a practice once reserved for a few specific ingredients.

In the past, families made grape molasses and dried figs as part of their seasonal food traditions. Now, they can't even harvest their own grapes, figs, or other fruits - because attempting to return to their land can cost them their lives. Many have been targeted and killed while trying to reach their orchards.

It's not just food culture that has changed - the war has disrupted social traditions, too. Weddings, once grand celebrations filled with warmth and generosity, where extended families and entire neighbourhoods were invited, have now been reduced to the bare minimum - or, in some cases, abandoned altogether. Each family's circumstances dictate what they can afford. In the past, families would gather for the wedding feast, followed by celebrations that lasted late into the night, bringing together extended families and entire communities. Today, weddings are no longer held in large family homes but in small, rented halls - if they happen at all.

Even marriage customs have changed. A bride once received a minimum dowry of around 100 grams of gold. Now, many couples marry without any gold at all. So many traditions have been lost, cut short by hardship. People have had to let go of customs they once cherished. But life has to go on.

Sarah: Sadly, this remains the reality for so many people even after the liberation. Let me ask you - you're a lawyer and legal consultant working with displaced people in the camps, and you also have a son with autism who requires special care. Despite all the hardships you face, you have never stopped working, helping others, and standing by your beliefs. For fourteen years, you have continued without losing your optimism, without letting anything break your spirit. What keeps you going? What drives you to do all this?

Rahma: I love life, and I love giving. I don't let anything stand in my way or stop me from fulfilling my purpose. I've learned so much from my son with autism. Caring for him has been one of the greatest challenges of my life, but also one of my greatest lessons. No one understands him like I do. Every morning, it breaks my heart to leave him for work. He waits for me, expecting me to sing to him, make his cappuccino, and feed him myself - just as he's used to.

Before I leave, I try not to meet his gaze because I know I have no choice but to go. His siblings look after him in my absence, but they can't provide the emotional support that only I, his mother, can. He knows that, too. He needs me in a way no one else can replace.

Sometimes, my children feel overwhelmed when I leave them with instructions or remind them repeatedly to take care of him. They love him deeply, but every time I step out to fulfil another responsibility, I feel like I'm leaving a piece of my heart behind. I long to return to him, to see him, to make sure he's been cared for properly. But at the same time, I know I can't turn away from the people who need me outside my home.

Raising my son has taught me to recognise suffering in others - sometimes, all it takes is a look. Just as I understand his pain without words, I see the struggles of those around me. Many displaced people have lost their legal papers - documents proving their marriages, divorces, or even the births of their children. These records were either

lost or never registered due to displacement. Through my work, I've helped restore their legal status, ensuring their rights are recognised again.

Over the past five years, we've worked to raise awareness about the importance of legal documentation. In the past, registering marriages, divorces, and deaths in the courts was a routine part of life. But for the displaced, even knowing where to go for these services became a challenge. We helped guide them, giving them back a sense of security they had lost.

What drives me most is my belief in the importance of this work. I feel that God has guided me in serving them, and my greatest motivation comes from my faith in this mission. God created us with purpose - each of us has a responsibility that gives meaning to our lives. We must honour the trust He has placed in us in every aspect - religious, social, and environmental.

Sarah: Knowing you personally, I continue to learn from your resilience - the kind of hope that allows us to persevere and move forward. Tell me, what are your hopes for your family and your community now, after the liberation?

Rahma: I felt an overwhelming sense of peace after the liberation. I no longer consider myself displaced - I have erased that word from my vocabulary. I can return home now.

For years, we lived in what felt like a prison within a prison. Even though we were close to our hometown, the fear of security crackdowns and the risk of arrest kept us from returning. But after the liberation, it was as if I had been freed from captivity. I regained my freedom, along with all the displaced and even those who had lived under oppression for so long.

I hope to see Syria thrive again, to be rebuilt through the determination of its people. I hope our culture and traditions will be revived, that we will gather once more as we used to. I am optimistic that this year, we will fast during Ramadan and celebrate Eid with our old traditions. Yes, people are struggling financially, but at least we are close to one another again. After years of separation, we can finally reunite.

I have not seen my mother and sisters for thirteen years. But now, for the first time in so long, there is hope that we will meet again. There was a time when I felt that being a Syrian was a burden, but today, I feel pride once more. I believe Syria will reclaim its place in the world. Syrians are a people full of life and creativity, and every country

that has taken in Syrian refugees has witnessed this in them. And I truly believe that one day, they will return home stronger than before.

Sarah: As we come to the end of this episode, what message would you like to share with our listeners - especially with women?

Rahma: Never give in to despair. Do not let it take hold of your heart, because it will blind you to everything but the end of the road. Hope is what lifts you out of that darkness. It's what allows you to see solutions, to move forward, and to keep going. Hold on to hope, to your faith, and to the purpose for which God created you - to worship Him and to live a life of meaning. Keep this always at the forefront of your heart and mind.

Sarah: We all need this kind of wisdom - to push forward, to endure, and to rebuild. This has been an incredibly valuable episode, offering deep insight into food culture, survival, and life after displacement and war. But above all, thank you for reminding us of the power of hope and the urgent need to work for Syria, its people, and all those who continue to struggle.

Rahma: And I thank you for giving me this opportunity - to share my voice with the world, to talk about everything we have lived through, and to share what we hope for as we rebuild Syria with our own hands. And I'll say it once again: There is no place for despair in life.

Sarah: I extend my heartfelt thanks to my guest, Rahma Hussein, and to you, our listeners. Join us for future episodes - we are always happy to connect with you through our website and social media platforms. We also welcome your messages and suggestions on topics you'd like us to cover in the episodes ahead.