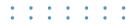


## VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

# Stretched: Protracted conflicts and the people living in the midst of it all



*Situations of protracted armed conflict, whether one armed conflict or a succession of several armed conflicts over a long period of time, subject the affected population to both short-term and long-term effects of warfare. Below are two timelines tracing the experiences of two women during situations of protracted conflict in two countries: Sheringul in Afghanistan, and Om Nawwar in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Their experiences show that life continues in such contexts, despite violence and instability.*

*Iraq has experienced violence for more than fifty years; the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been working in that context since 1980. Afghanistan has experienced violence for more than forty years; the ICRC has been working there since 1978.*

*Humanitarian organizations need to take into account the needs of populations affected by protracted conflict. Ultimately, however, only political solutions will bring an end to the violence and destruction.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Some names have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals concerned.

<sup>2</sup> These testimonies first appeared in the temporary exhibition “Stretched”, which appeared at the ICRC’s Humanitarium in Geneva, November 2018–April 2019.



## SHERINGUL

Afghanistan

**1991**

Her third daughter is born.

**1992**

Her first son is born. Because of the fighting, Sheringul moves from Helmand to Peshawar, Pakistan, where she will live for twelve years.

**1979**

Sheringul gets married at 14 years old. She does not have children for over ten years.

**1989**

Sheringul's first daughter is born.

**1987**

Sheringul's husband is injured.

**1990**

Her second daughter is born.

**1994**

Her second son is born.

**1997**

Her fifth daughter is born.

**1995**

Her third son is born.

**1993**

Her fourth daughter is born.

## 2005

Sheringul's fourth daughter dies in Pakistan through illness and lack of access to medical care.

## 2016

Sheringul begins vocational training with the ICRC. She is the only breadwinner among the seventeen members of her family. Her husband is old and was injured in the violence in Afghanistan. He has one kidney and has diabetes and heart problems, too. Sheringul, through the ICRC's vocational training programme, learns tailoring and embroidery. Before taking part in the programme in Helmand, she did not know how to sew clothes.

## 2015

Sheringul and her family come back to Afghanistan; they live in a rented house in Lashkar Gah, a city in Helmand Province.

## 2008

Her 26-year-old son loses his leg in a suicide attack near their house; he is left bedridden and unable to move.

## 2017

Sheringul is selected to work for the ICRC as a vocational trainer, teaching other women like her. The training course begins in February 2017, but is then put on hold when the ICRC has to suspend its activities due to the security situation. The course restarts in August 2017 and ends in October. Sheringul teaches tailoring and embroidery to twenty illiterate women. After the training course ends, she and her four daughters start making clothes at home to sell on the market. They sew six, sometimes seven items of clothing a day. "Now everyone in my family sees me as a heroine – even my brother-in-law, who was not happy when I started the course with the ICRC last year. But even he now wants his wife to come and learn tailoring from me."



## OM NAWWAR

Iraq

# 1991

Her cousin's husband goes missing.

# 1989

Her second son, Anmar, is born.

# 1965

Om Nawwar is born on 1 July. Her official name is Muntaha Badran, but in many Arabic-speaking countries, it is traditional to call people by another name that incorporates the name of their eldest son. In Arabic *om* means “mother”, so Om Nawwar means “Mother of Nawwar”.

# 1982

Om Nawwar gets married. She is 17 years old; her husband, Ali El Najm, is 30. Ali is an employee in the national electricity company but is conscripted into the army to fight in the Iran–Iraq War. He is put in charge of operating the sirens that warn of Iranian air strikes. Om Nawwar leaves her house for a few weeks to stay with her parents-in-law, as it is safer for a young woman not to stay alone with small children while her husband is away.

# 1984

Her husband's nephew is killed in the war. In July, her first son, Nawwar, is born.

## 2017

From mid-February to the end of March, Om Nawwar lives during the siege of Mosul in her tiny cellar under her house with forty other people. One day shrapnel hits the walls inside. In April, she is displaced to the al-Thawra neighbourhood.

On 21 April, Om Nawwar and her family decide to flee to an area controlled by the Iraqi security forces. However, her son Nawwar reaches the area but cannot find his mother, brother and sisters. He asks his wife to take the kids and wait for him with her family while he goes back. An officer warns him of the danger they are in, because they are on the front line between the army and the Islamic State group.

Nawwar insists he has to go back. A soldier volunteers to guide him part of the way and then wait for him for thirty minutes; if he has not come back by then, the soldier will leave. The son agrees and finds his family, but while they are running back, Om Nawwar falls

and injures herself. On 23 April, her son Selwan goes back to school for the first time in three years. In June, her brother Ali is killed when a mortar bomb hits his house. His wife and daughter are injured. In the same month, Om Nawwar's brother Ahmed is killed – his hands and feet are chopped off.

In July, Om Nawwar visits her home in Mosul for the first time since the end of hostilities. She finds her house damaged by the shelling and her old family home nearby destroyed. All the objects that her husband collected over twenty years and kept in a room he built on the rooftop have been scattered and burnt by a mortar bomb. She comes back almost every week to clean and take care of the house, but cannot stay because the neighbourhood is too damaged; some houses are close to collapse and the road is obstructed by rubble. Each time she and her family come back, they clean and remove rubble from a different part of the house.

## 1994

Her third son, Ammar, is born. Because of years of economic sanctions (1990–2003), when one of Om Nawwar's sons falls ill and loses all his hair, she cannot afford to pay for proper medical treatment. His medical condition later worsens, affecting his liver and sight. He is still living with the consequences.

### 2002

Om Nawwar gives birth to her first daughter, Manar.

### 2007

Om Nawwar's youngest son, Selwan, is born.

## 2016

In February, Om Nawwar's nephew, Bassam, is killed. In March, another nephew and a niece of hers are killed by a mortar bomb. In September, her husband dies at home from a stroke and heart attack, "because he was thinking too much", she says. "He was constantly worried and suffered from ill health. We couldn't go out; we were always afraid for the children. We feared someone would take them away and kill them, because these things were happening."

## 2018

In the spring of 2018, Om Nawwar comes back to her house to stay, but finds it has been looted. Only a very few objects remain, such as her husband's home-made radio. "It is difficult to come back to this house where my husband died. We spent our life here but now there's nothing. We have to start from scratch. We have nothing left. They even took our clothes."