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From Syrian refugee to DePaul Law graduate: How he survived torture during revolution before fleeing to Chicago

Zareen Syed

13–17 minutes

He says he can't really describe torture or the night terrors that still creep up on him years later, but he'll try. He starts out with a picture: a prison cell the size of a rug and a creaky door that he couldn't help but stare at. Every time it opened, he knew he'd either be released or tortured once again.

When Emad Mahou tells the story of being imprisoned in Syria during the 2011 revolution, his voice has a heaviness, unlike the joy he exhibits when talking about not knowing how to order a Subway sandwich when he arrived in Chicago as a refugee.

With his hands he demonstrates the ups and downs of the last 12 years — from being released and offered refuge in America to graduating from the DePaul University School of Law. As his wife, 8-year-old daughter and his father stood in the stands, he walked across the stage with hopes of practicing human rights law to help other refugees coming into the country.

Mahou's father, Shirkou Mahou, flew in from Lebanon to attend the

May 20 ceremony on a visit visa.

“I’m seeing a part of my dad I didn’t see before,” Mahou said. “He’s an old man. When I left he was much stronger, much younger.”

On a May afternoon, days before the graduation ceremony, Mahou’s dad was sitting next to him on a couch in one of DePaul’s Loop campus law buildings, wearing a brown suit, white shirt and a prayer hat on his head.

It’s his first time in America. His first time seeing his son’s new life up close — so different from the life he left at age 21.

He cried audibly every now and then, especially when Mahou would translate for him into Arabic parts of what he was sharing about the Syria of his childhood versus the Syria he left behind.

Shirkou Mahou waves to his son, DePaul University College of Law grad Emad Mahou, as all graduates' family members were applauded during the law school's commencement ceremony at the Chicago Theatre on May 20, 2023. (John J. Kim/Chicago

Tribune)

DePaul University College of Law graduate Emad Mahou stands with fellow students during the law school's commencement ceremony at the Chicago Theatre. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

“I grew up in a loving, very beautiful, family-oriented environment. I miss going to my grandma’s sister’s house — my dad’s *khalto*,” Mahou said. “Life is so simple there. We’d all be sitting around this heating machine that burns oil and we’re sitting and playing cards and talking and telling stories, and it’s already 11 o’clock. Kids will be sleeping on the bed or on the sofa and adults will be talking and it’s the middle of the winter. And that is almost a nightly thing.

“Syria today is a country torn by civil war and I hate to say that,” Mahou said. “To leave my town, you have to go through a checkpoint where there is a tank and they will pull you over if you’re wanted, and they will shoot you on the side of the road like a dog. Who lives like that? My cousin was pulled out of a bus and

shot. That's the Syria I left."

Mahou and his father were part of the rebellion during the Syrian revolution, which started roughly in February 2011 with the early stages of protests against Syria's government, which was led by President Bashar Assad. The rebels, as they called themselves, were taking to the streets to object to the authoritarian tactics of Assad's regime, which was known for its pervasive censorship, surveillance and brutal violence against those who disagreed.

The uprising was noncombative at first, Mahou said, but by March, hubs of protesters were frequently met with heavy military weaponry.

Mahou said he and his family always had a target on their back, dating to when his paternal grandfather refused a high-ranking government appointment by Assad's father. Mahou said his father was arrested several times for protesting, as was he.

During a raid toward the second half of 2011, military police came looking for Mahou. At that time, Mahou's resistance entered a new phase. He was tapped by media outlets, likely because of his strong English skills, and became sort of a "boots on the ground" source, though his face and name were hidden anytime he was on air with reporters.

Mahou was hiding at a distant cousin's house. She was a widow without children, therefore her home was an unlikely place for police to come barging in.

"But somehow they got a tip that I might be hiding in this area," Mahou said. "I was watching from the third-floor window and thinking ... there's no way I'm making it out of there. I see a truck full of army men coming and I'm like, 'Oh my God, what am I going

to do? I'm gonna get killed.' From the roof, I jumped from her building onto the building next door and twisted my foot."

Mahou hid in a water tank until the sounds of footsteps and clunking AK-47s subsided.

"It's like a movie — you won't believe what happened to us. And this is a story out of millions of stories similar to this," he said.

In October 2011, United Nations human rights officials estimated that more than 3,000 people were killed since the start of the protests in March, including nearly 200 children.

Mahou said from 2011 to the present day, he lost several loved ones.

Sitting forward in his seat, Mahou starts counting on his fingers, his immediate family members who died in protests, run-ins with military police and in jail.

He shows eight fingers. He then starts counting extended family, but quickly stops. "I'll get to like 50 people if I keep going," he said.

His father, upon hearing the names of those who died, starts crying again.

Mahou's memories of some of his arrests are blurry, except for one in which he was detained and tortured for three months. In June 2011, he said he spent 100 days in an underground cell the size of a rug. He didn't know it when he was thrown in, but this would also be the last time he'd be imprisoned.

"The torture was really over the limit at that point. I was really struggling with the pain," Mahou said. "It was daily, continuous, degrading. One day in particular, they took turns urinating on me. It got to a point where mentally I was broken. You smell yourself and

I felt really, really bad. I am used to a nice life. I showered daily. I was in college to be an architect."

Mahou stops and reminds himself that he had a full life in Zabadani, Syria, before the revolution. They all did.

"At that point, I was almost done with college and I had a whole future ahead of me. And I just looked at where I am now. That day was my weakest day mentally. I was shattered. The humiliation went too far — like they're using you as a toilet ... so I banged my head on the wall."

Mahou recalled falling to the ground after that and feeling the door open.

He felt a breeze. He remembered his cat, Sasha; he visualized the marble tiles of his family's home, the comforting chaos of his kitchen, his mom cooking a meal. "It was a message that I shouldn't be dying here today. And I didn't die. I made it all the way out of Syria and I made it to Chicago," he said.

"We all have those moments when you remember something and it saves you," Mahou said. "I don't think God talks to us directly but I think God can guide us somehow. I think that was probably my guidance that, you know what, you're not dying here."

That's when he was released from prison. But knowing that he could get picked up again by another security branch, Mahou, like many others in the rebellion, needed an escape.

Syrian security services began to increase pressure on activists and crack down on protesters. With the help of fellow rebels, Mahou was escorted to the southern border of Syria, where he fled to Jordan.

In Jordan, Mahou did what millions of people fleeing countries do: He registered as a refugee with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a United Nations refugee agency.

Refugees who are in the system can indicate their goals for resettlement, which for Mahou was the United States. Though it could take many months — years even — for an individual to get through the queue.

Mahou was connected with the U.S. Embassy in Amman shortly after his arrival in Jordan. He described to embassy staff how his work with Syria's opposition-affiliated media presented dangers to his personal safety in Jordan as well as to his family still in Syria. The embassy ultimately was able to work with the UN refugee agency to expedite his resettlement in Chicago.

Mahou was in Jordan from December 2011 until July 26, 2012, when he arrived at O'Hare International Airport.

DePaul University College of Law graduate Emad Mahou kisses his 8-year-old daughter, Sophia, after the law school's commencement ceremony at the Chicago Theatre. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

The marquee celebrates DePaul University College of Law graduates during its commencement ceremony at the Chicago Theatre on May 20, 2023. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

When Mahou landed in Chicago, he had two small bags of belongings, $100 and a sealed envelope with “do not open” in bold letters across the front.

The official documents explaining his refugee status, he later learned, were only to be opened by immigration officials. After what felt like ages, Mahou said his documents were stamped, his fingerprints taken, his picture taken and he was free to pass the checkpoint.

“You know how in Terminal 5 there are two exits? I had no idea where I was going or what I was doing,” Mahou said. “And I speak English, but it was not this English — not law school English. It was my English in 2011.”

He said he walked out and spotted a representative from World Relief, the organization assigned to Mahou’s relocation services, holding a sign with his name. The World Relief representative reached into his pocket and gave Mahou $103 in cash after showing him a check of the same amount addressed to the organization.

“So now I have $200 — like, wow, I got some money,” Mahou said with a laugh. “I still remember how I spent those $200.”

He was taken to a studio on Kimball Avenue, not far from the airport. It was $550 a month. Mahou said the U.S. government paid one month of the rent, World Relief paid half a month, and then he was on his own.

“There was a kitchen, a table, two chairs, a twin bed mattress, one cover, one spoon, one fork, one knife, one shaving blade, one frying pan,” Mahou said. “And that whole night I was looking out the window and watching the airplanes because I couldn’t drown them out. I was so far from home. I think I just sat there crying all night.”

Very quickly, a disastrous attempt to order a Subway sandwich, a daunting bus ride where the driver wouldn’t take the $5 Mahou was handing over, a costly T-Mobile 4G hot spot and more Subway sandwiches later, he ran out of money. He didn’t have a resume because he worked at his father’s business all his life, but he still put on his dad’s old suit. His first job in America was

providing wheelchair service in O'Hare's Terminal 5. Something about it just felt safer than it had a month ago, Mahou said.

In 2013, while Mahou was still figuring out Chicago's "color-coded train lines," his mom and now 25-year-old sister relocated to Lebanon and his father followed them a year later after being detained by the Syrian regime. According to the United States Institute of Peace, the Syrian conflict displaced an estimated 13 million people with over 6.2 million Syrians internally displaced. Approximately 5.6 million refugees now live in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Mahou said he was in touch with his family as much as he could be.

He started attending community college at Harry Truman toward a degree in computer science in the fall of 2013, before transferring to DeVry. In 2017, he got a job as a web developer for the board of trustees at DePaul University. There he met law professor Craig Mousin, who sat in an office across from Mahou.

Mousin said when Mahou realized that he taught at the law school and that his specific area of teaching was asylum and refugee law, it piqued his interest.

"Emad has intimate knowledge of how governments can use all the power and authority they have to stifle dissent," Mousin said. "And sometimes in doing asylum and human rights cases, there's this built-in assumption that governments would not hurt their own citizens. And sometimes it's very difficult for people in the United States who live with relative freedom to understand that. Emad's felt the brunt of that failure."

With Mousin's guidance, Mahou tapped into his experience of

standing up for freedom in Syria and what he calls “a rebel mentality” to figure out that what he actually wants to do isn’t web development, but rather become a lawyer. On May 20, he earned his juris doctorate.

“I really want to learn about other people’s experiences in the system,” said Mahou, who now lives in Oak Park. “People who are fleeing persecution, traveling through dangerous paths to seek refuge, those are the people I want to help.”

Mahou said he’s now studying for the bar exam but was fortunate to get a taste of the kind of cases he would like to work on when he enrolled in DePaul’s Asylum and Immigration Law Clinic, where he helped put together an asylum petition for a family.

As Mahou recounts his tale, he shares that he’s seen his parents for a total of 20 days since 2011, during short visits to Lebanon. And now he was making up for lost time.

His father said it was OK that he had such limited time with his son because his visa expires Thursday. “*Alhamdulillah* for everything,” he said. “I’m grateful to God for his life.”

Mahou agreed, though he wished some things could be different. Or maybe just easier.

He said for every person who looked at him like a “Pokemon walking around” when he’d stumble through ordering food, paying for the bus or reloading his CTA card, there were always a few more who would stop to make sure he knew where he was going. When he first came to Chicago he was 21. Now at 34 — with a job, a family, a law degree, a community of colleagues and friends — there’s a part of him that’s still a little unsettled.

“I have been struggling with what is home for the past 12 years,” Mahou says. “How can I define home? Where can I find home? I can’t say my daughter is my home because she’s just too little to carry that burden. ... I have a passport that has the United States of America on it, I have my picture, my name — everything. And I still feel I’m not from here. *Is* there a point when I am no longer not from here?”

zsyed@chicagotribune.com