

## Life on the Line

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Sima Mizyed crossed a line few Israelis ever do. She left her Jewish family, converted to Islam, married an Arab, and moved to the other side of Jerusalem.

That itself is not unique. Several hundred Jewish women have married Arabs, and live quiet lives out of the spotlight. But not Mizyed.

Thirteen years after marrying Wahil Mizyed - and after alleged extramarital affairs, desertion and abuse - Sima tried to recross the line to her former life. She packed up her five children last year and moved back to west Jerusalem. She initiated divorce proceedings, took out a restraining order against her husband and 'reconverted' to Judaism.

On April 4, 1998, the day after the restraining order expired, Sima Mizyed told her son she was going out for an hour.

It's been three months, and she still hasn't returned.

Police don't believe she ever will. They arrested her husband, Wahil, and his younger brother, Marwan, more than a month ago. And they had enough evidence to convince the state attorney last week to extend the suspects' remand beyond the legal limit of 30 days. The one thing police don't have - as this article went to press - is the body of Sima Mizyed.

What remains are the wildly conflicting versions of Sima and Wahil's life. The Mizyed family tells one story. Sima's family, friends - and Sima herself - as reported to a social worker before she disappeared, tell another.

And amidst it all lies the custody battle between Wahil and Sima's families over the fate of the couple's five children, a legal fight already messy enough without the Arab-Jewish social divide - and the possibility of murder - thrown into the equation.

Sima Hamu, 30, is the oldest of seven children born to Moroccan immigrants. Her

parents divorced when she was very young, and her mother remarried. Her natural father, with whom she had no contact, has died.

After her mother divorced, Sima was placed in a foster home and her siblings were sent to welfare institutions. Sima lived with her foster family in Jerusalem for 11 years, but never saw it as a home, she told the social worker.

Annette Hamu, Sima's mother, worked as a housekeeper, and her stepfather worked as a security guard - when he worked at all. They lived in subsidized housing in the Ramot neighborhood of Jerusalem.

At age 15, Sima left her foster family and started working. It was on her first job at the Kolbotek department store that she met 21-year-old Wahil Mizyed.

Mizyed, now 35, is the third of nine children born to what he calls a 'modern Moslem' family in the eastern Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. His father runs a fruit store, his mother is a homemaker.

Wahil went to school in Jerusalem and in Jordan, and wanted to study politics and economics at the Open University in Beirut. Along the way, Wahil worked in several Jerusalem restaurants: as a cook at the Hebrew University campus on Givat Ram, as an assistant chef at the Diplomat Hotel, and most recently - until his arrest - as a chef and head of the kitchen at the Little Italy restaurant.

About a year after Sima and Wahil started dating, she found out she was pregnant.

'I always had Jewish girlfriends,' Wahil says, 'But I never thought I would marry a Jewish girl. When I found out Sima was pregnant, I took the responsibility on myself to marry her.'

They were opposites in more ways than their religions: Short and trim, with a clipped beard framing coffee-colored skin, Wahil was well-educated and well-off, from a close-knit, respected family; Sima, an ample woman with long stringy hair, had only completed elementary school.

'When I heard my daughter was marrying an Arab, my whole world was destroyed,' says Annette. 'I didn't leave my house for three days.'

Sima's stepfather cut ties, and Annette did not resume phone contact with her daughter until Sima gave birth to her third child.

The Mizyed family, on the other hand, was happy about the marriage - especially when Sima decided to convert to Islam.

'We love her very much,' says 40-year-old Ziad, Wahil's eldest brother. Despite everything, he speaks fondly of her: 'She is family.'

It's been nearly 14 years since Sima and Wahil wed; the couple lived for many years in Shuafat. While Wahil worked, Sima stayed home with the children and spent time with friends.

There are several Jewish women married to Arab men who live in Shuafat and Sheikh Jarrah, neighborhoods which sit on the border between the Jewish and Arab sections of the city.

The Mizyeds' neighbor in Sheikh Jarrah, Shulamit, is a Jewish woman from Jerusalem also married to an Arab man. 'Wahil's mother would do everything for Sima,' Shulamit says. 'She loved her very much and treated her like a daughter.'

The marriage stumbled along for almost a decade. Annette says that about four years ago, Sima - then a mother of four - called to plead with her.

'Sima told me that he was beating her,' Annette says. 'She called and said, 'Only a mother can help her daughter. I have no one to turn to.' So we met, and she told me she was going to get a divorce. I told her to come live in the western section of Jerusalem.'

But Sima returned to Sheikh Jarrah and did not move forward with her plans because she discovered she was pregnant with her fifth child, a daughter. It was at this time, Shulamit says, that 'Wahil didn't always come home from work and Sima complained he had no time for her. There was a lot of screaming, a lot of fights. Sima complained that he beat her.'

Wahil denies any charges of violence. His brother, Ziad, says, 'Like most married couples, they had problems. She left home a number of times, and we'd sit together and talk, and eventually she went back.'

According to the family services report filed last February by a social worker who met with Sima and Wahil after they were separated, 'Wahil says they had a good relationship until 13 months ago [January 1997]. Sima says there were problems from the beginning.'

'The trouble started when I converted to Islam,' Sima told the social worker. On the day she converted, she said, Wahil slapped her in the face.

Culture clashes contributed to the discord and abuse over the years, she said, but she 'kept quiet because I had no familial support.' Sima said

that Wahil once threatened her and her daughter with a knife.

Wahil told the social worker that Sima was the one with a violent temper, 'scaring' the children. She wanted to bring a gun into the house, he said, but he refused.

'I didn't beat her or my children,' he told the social worker, adding: 'Why would she abandon the children and leave them with me if I was violent?'

The first time Sima left her home - and her children - was in April 1997, a year before she disappeared. She stayed at the house of a friend, a mukhtar's daughter, for 40 days. Wahil took care of the children for a week and then deposited them at his brother's house until Sima came home.

Three months after she returned, Sima left again. She filed for divorce in the Sharia - the Islamic courts that serve the Arab sector - and, Wahil says, she was ready to give up the children. But before the divorce went through, Sima returned home. That was in November 1997.

Sima never said where she had gone the second time. Wahil's family and neighbors charge that she was having an affair with a friend of hers, Ahmed Wazwaz. Wahil, who was working two jobs to support the family and send his children to private school, said he had called home often to find the phone busy or Sima out.

'Last year she changed,' says Ziad. He said Sima was friendly with new, wild people - people they didn't like. Marwan, Wahil's younger brother, spoke to Wahil about 'family honor.'

Both Sima and Wahil have accused each other of ties with the Palestinian Authority.

Wahil said that Sima wasn't staying with a friend the second time she ran away, but that she went into PA- controlled territories.

When Sima filed for a restraining order against Wahil, she complained he threatened to kidnap the children and take them to the areas under Palestinian rule.

Palestinian security chief Jibril Rajoub says that Pnina Hop - a former Magistrate's Court worker who converted to Islam - came to him with a picture of Sima Mizyed. 'She asked us to help find Sima,' said Rajoub last month. 'But we told her we had no information. We don't know her or have any connection to her.'

Police deny working with Palestinian police or others to search for Sima.

When Sima returned that November, fights broke out over money. Checks she had written while she was away bounced. ('I wrote some checks,' Sima told the social worker. 'So what? I thought that was part of the reconciliation deal.')

Wahil told the social worker he had been willing to postpone the discussions over money. But it was too late.

In December 1997, Sima took the children and moved into an apartment in the Katamonim area in west Jerusalem. She wanted to return to Judaism, and raise her children - whose mother tongue was Arabic and were raised as Moslems - as Jewish. Sima started going to the mikve and began conversion proceedings in the rabbinate for her five children - Jewish according to Halacha but not listed as such on their identity cards.

A custody battle for the children began. The Sharia court granted Wahil and his mother, Yusra, custody. But the Jerusalem Family Court gave the children to Sima. The case went to the High Court of Justice.

The social worker's report - which was filed with the family court on February 22 - was submitted to the court. The two boys and three girls, ranging in age from three to 12, lived with their mother, and met with their father every Tuesday under a social worker's supervision. Wahil was not allowed to meet with the children at home.

On January 3, Jerusalem police granted Sima a restraining order that forbade Wahil from contacting or visiting Sima for three months. On Friday, April 3, Sima told her sister Shoshi and her mother that she was going to renew the order on Sunday, after the weekend.

On Saturday, April 4, Sima received a phone call. She spoke quietly, her oldest son says. Taking only her purse, she told him she would be gone for an hour.

'I don't know who called,' he says. 'But she told me she was going out for an hour and she never came back. She never leaves us [since they moved to the Katamonim].'

Annette stayed with the children that night. By Sunday morning, when Sima still hadn't returned, Annette alerted the police. They opened a missing-person file.

By the end of April, police had arrested the man suspected of having an affair with Sima. They released him on bail after 27 days, although he

is still considered a suspect.

On June 30, the police arrested Marwan Mizyed for theft. When Wahil - who had just returned from Jordan - came to visit him, police arrested them both on suspicion of involvement in Sima's disappearance.

'How could he have done it?' says Ziad. 'We only found out that Sima disappeared two days later. We have been working to help police in the investigation, and they arrested Wazwaz, who is still a suspect. Why did they let Wazwaz go?'

Ziad thinks the arrest had nothing to do with Sima's disappearance, but was connected to the custody battle over the children. He charges that police are working with the Jewish courts, to make sure the children remain in custody of the Jewish family.

On April 5, two days after Sima's disappearance, the High Court overturned the rabbinate's conversion of the five children, ruling it illegal to convert minors without both parents' consent. The High Court was supposed to decide on custody by the end of June.

That's when police arrested Wahil and Marwan.

'I think the police arrested my brother,' says Zaid, 'because he was supposed to get custody of the children.'

The police did recommend that the family court deny Wahil custody of the children - even prior to his arrest. Documents from the family-court custody case of June 2 state that, 'Police requested from the court that the children remain under protection of the welfare department because there is a great fear for the welfare of the children if they remain in the father's care....'

The police thought there was a danger the children might be taken to PA territories and out of their jurisdiction. But a social worker told the family court that she was impressed 'by the warm relationship between the father [Wahil] and his children and his desire to get custody of the children and get professional help in dealing with their future.'

Based on these conflicting testimonies, the family court ruled that the children should remain under foster care provided by the welfare department, while continuing to see their father in weekly supervised visits. The court would reevaluate the custody decision after another social worker submitted a report in 30 days - July 2. But police arrested Wahil and Marwan on June 30.

The police deny any connection between the custody case and the arrest.

The Mizyeds' lawyer, Menahem Blum, also rejects the family's claim. 'I think police arrested my clients because this case has been going on for months and they haven't caught anyone,' he says. 'They have to show something.'

The brothers were arrested when evidence showed their alibi for April 4 was not accurate. According to traces on their mobile phones, the brothers were in the Givon Forest, located between Givat Ze'ev and the Arab village of Bidu.

Two weeks ago, hundreds of security forces began searching the forest. Lead investigator Shmulik Piamentes called Annette and told her they expected to find her daughter's body. The police believe that Wahil and Marwan killed Sima. They have extended the two brothers' remand six times, based on classified evidence.

Blum accuses police of trying to 'break' the brothers by separating them, inviting the families for questioning, and - in Wahil's case - not providing him with medical care for his ulcers.

Blum argued to the court that police have no evidence and are desperate to hold onto the suspects to force them to confess to a crime they did not commit, a crime that might not have even occurred. Without a corpse, police don't even know there was a murder, he says. Sima might have voluntarily left her home and run away. She did so before.

Last week Jerusalem Magistrate's Court Judge Aryeh Romanov wanted to release the brothers on NIS 25,000 bail because 'police do not have enough evidence to charge the suspects - or anyone else - for the crime.'

Police don't want the brothers released, Piamentes says. 'There is a reasonable suspicion that the suspects hurt the missing woman,' and 'We have more than a reasonable suspicion to assume that the whole family and the brothers coordinated their stories.'

Earlier this week, Wahil and Marwan were still waiting to be either released or charged. The five Mizyed children remain in foster care in west Jerusalem; they haven't seen their father or his family since his arrest.

And in the Givon Forest, police continue their search for Sima Mizyed.  
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