

# The war that wives and mothers can never win

When Lebanon bled like Bosnia, young people died and mothers grieved. Robert Fisk meets those whose pain knows no ceasefire

IN LEBANON, the men generally did the dying and the women did the mourning. Most of the dead were killed in massacres and air raids and in the routine shelling of towns and cities, ethnically "cleansed" as savagely as those now burning in Bosnia.

Westerners remember their handful of hostages in Beirut and forget that perhaps 30,000 Lebanese were kidnapped in the country's 15-year war; of these, 17,000 disappeared forever.

Outrages against women in Bosnia have only emphasised a cruel truth: war lasts longer for mothers and wives, whose sons and husbands — and

occasionally daughters — participate in conflict. Almost three years after the end of the civil war in Beirut, Lebanese women are still suffering the results of a tragedy that cost 150,000 lives. Many wait vainly for loved ones kidnapped almost a decade ago. Others cling to the desperate hope that dead sons may have survived. A few wait for daughters whom they know to be still alive.

As the death toll of the Balkan war approaches that of Lebanon's — at eight times the speed — the experiences of three Beirut mothers are a cruel reminder of the agony that continues long after the last shots have been fired.

## Tell me, is my daughter alive?

Najat Bshara's daughter, Souhad, was arrested in 1988, accused of attempting to assassinate a senior officer in the "South Lebanon Army" militia, which works for the Israeli occupation army in the far south of the country. Najat is still not sure if Souhad is dead or alive.

THERE IS only one grainy monochrome picture in Najat Bshara's tiny, paint-peeled front room. But it is a powerful one, of a pretty, even beautiful girl with sparkling, intelligent eyes. You would not think she was an aspiring assassin.

Najat recalls her story with passion, a woman who is used to being ignored because her daughter was a participant rather than a victim of the war. Listening to her, it is possible to believe Souhad was also a victim.

The family lived at Deir Mimess, in what is now Israel's occupation zone in southern Lebanon. "There were Palestinians in our village when Souhad was young," Najat says. "Souhad spent a year at school there but then people began to go about

with guns. We moved up to Beirut where Souhad went to school.

The Bshara family are Christian but have lived in Muslim west Beirut since 1976. "Souhad did her third-year architecture degree exams at the Lebanese University at the age of 21. We were very proud of her. She had many friends from the college. They would come here in the evenings and, when there was no shelling, they would sit out on the roof and read their books together. She also loved embroidery." There is a delicate lace cloth on the sideboard on which Souhad's picture stands. "She used to work so hard, I would argue and fight with her. She was an honours student. She spoke fluent French, with English as an extra language."

Only occasionally does there creep into Najat's story a clue to her daughter's thoughts at this time. One of their relatives was shot dead by an Israeli soldier. Souhad had been "very moved, very deeply upset" by the incident. A cousin was killed by a car bomb in west Beirut, another by a

landmine near the family's south Lebanese village. And Najat herself was badly wounded on the first floor of her building when a shell fired from east Beirut came through an upstairs window. In 1988 the family moved back to Deir Mimess and Souhad — to Najat's surprise and concern — made friends with the young wife of the retired Brigadier General Antoine Lahd, whose "South Lebanon Army" works for the Israeli army in the far south.

"Souhad used to do aerobics and there was talk of her running a health club for Mrs Lahd in Marjayoun ('capital' of the occupation zone). Lahd and his wife came to love Souhad and treated her like their own daughter. She would visit their home and leave without even being searched. There were no feuds between our families. We were all Christians."

"One morning, we were out in our orchards when we saw lots of people running to the village. Someone said: 'There has been an attack on General Lahd.' I knew Souhad was in Marjayoun. She had gone to stay with a cousin who was a dentist and was planning to visit the Lahds to say goodbye. I suddenly had this feeling that it was Souhad who was involved. Then some of Lahd's soldiers came and put me in a car and put a black hood over my head and handcuffed me."

The story that unfolded was terrible and mysterious. Lahd had answered the door when Souhad called — he has given me his own account of the incident, which tallies precisely with Najat's — only to find that the girl he trusted produced a revolver and shot him in the face. Emergency surgery in Israel just saved Lahd's life.

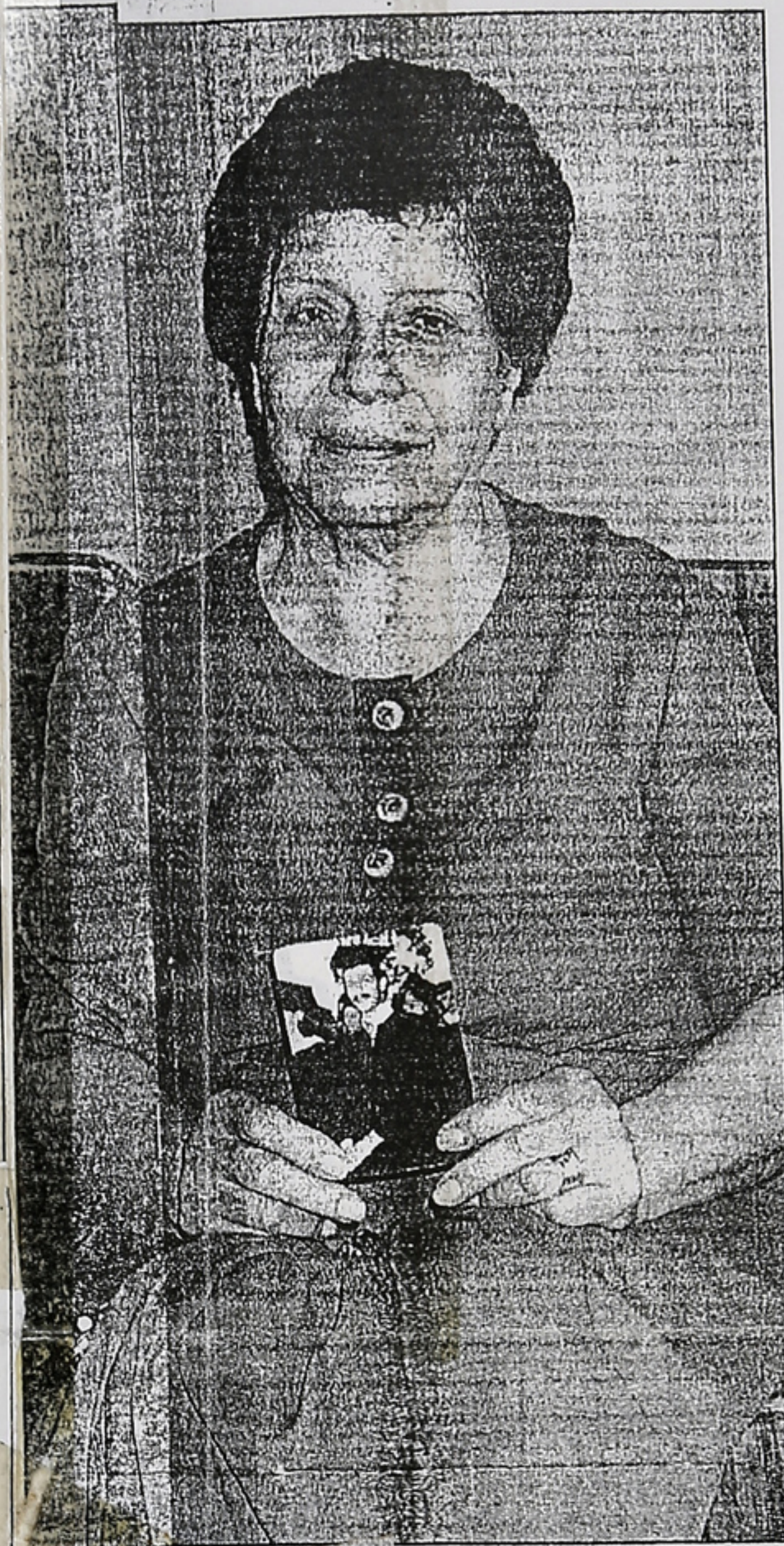
Najat was taken to Israel's Khiam prison in southern Lebanon, an old French fortress in which, according to Amnesty International, inmates are routinely tortured with electricity. "They took me to a room, still hooded. They told me Souhad was in the room. From just under the hood, I could see her legs. My first reaction was 'Thank you, my daughter — so this is what you've brought me to.' She did not reply. Then they put me in solitude for 13 days. When they eventually released me, they deported me from Deir Mimess, along with the dentist cousin and his family."

Souhad is still in Khiam but Najat never saw her again. The Israelis will allow neither her nor the International Red Cross to visit her daughter, who — in a brief interview with a French news magazine in April 1989 — complained she was at first badly beaten in the prison but was later treated more humanely. Najat is not permitted to send even clothes to Souhad.

But why? Why should this intelligent young woman have tried to kill Lahd? Najat is at first withdrawn, almost coy about suggesting any reason. The dentist cousin later died in a French car accident. Then Najat says: "If [sic] Souhad did attempt to assassinate Lahd, it was to defend her country. It was not out of vengeance against Lahd. Other nations brought about this war and they should show mercy to all still held in prison here."

And then it comes out. The Lebanese Communist Party later claimed Souhad as an honoured member. Najat's husband was a Communist and she thinks he may have influenced her to join the party. She speaks as if "influenced" should read "misled".

"Two years ago, I read that Souhad had been 'eliminated'. The Red Cross said she was still alive. But what can I



Samira Zakharia with a snapshot of her kidnapped son, Iskandar

## His room is just as he left it in 1985

Samira Zakharia believes that her son Iskandar, a marketing graduate who worked in a bank, is still alive eight years after being kidnapped. The family is Christian.

ANOTHER colour snapshot, this time of a proud graduate, a smart young man in a mortar board at Beirut University College. Iskandar Zakharia's mother, Samira, weeps from time to time as she tells her story, not ritually as do so many Lebanese women when they speak of their grief, but in small, confused sniffs, a middle-class woman appalled to find her defences so easily broken.

"He is so gentle, a good boy, we are so proud of him. He loves life. He loves swimming and music — classical and jazz." Note the present tense. Is. Are. Iskandar was kidnapped eight years ago. How could he possibly be alive, you ask yourself? But of course, you do not ask Samira this. "I think he had some girlfriends at university, but he was working at the British Bank of the Middle East. His manager was very proud of him. He said he has a great future. On 2 May 1985, he came home from the bank at about 7pm and watched television. Not the news — he didn't like the news. He liked cowboy films, not politics. Then at about 9.30, some men called at our home."

With guns? "Who knows? We did not see any, but they must have had guns in the cars down below. They rang the doorbell of our apartment. He was watching television and came to the door and one of them said: 'We want you to come with us, just to answer a question, and then we'll bring you back.' He refused and asked them who they were. They just insisted and there was nothing we could do. So he left with them. There were soldiers in the barracks across the street but they did nothing. They were too afraid. The men took Iskandar away — but they never brought him back."

Iskandar was not involved in politics, had never held a gun in his life, had no known enemies. So why him?

"Because he is a Christian man. There were many kidnappings of Christians and Muslims at that time and we are Christians living in west Beirut. We had received phone calls before this, so many calls. A man would come on the phone and say the names of my sons and daughter and my husband and myself and when I asked 'What do you want?' he would close the line."

Samira believes the Druze militia or Hizbollah kidnapped her son — both deny this — and has convinced herself that he is being held in the Sheikh Abdullah barracks in Baalbek. She has been told this by "some people" — more of those anonymous informants — but the Baalbek barracks, which was once controlled by Iranian Revolutionary Guards, is now back in the hands of the Lebanese government army. And there are, very definitely, no hostages inside. "I have been to so many people. I went myself to Hizbollah and they told me they wanted to help but couldn't. Some people..." — those infuriating, unidentified figures yet again — "some people used to give me news for the first two years after Iskandar was kidnapped, they said 'they' still have him." "They"? Samira shrugs.

"We are waiting for the government to release Iskandar and all these other men. The government is doing nothing for us." And then Samira breaks down. She remembers the holidays Iskandar took in Austria, Greece and Cyprus. And she remembers how long it is since he disappeared. "His room is just as he left it, all his suits, his jackets, just as he left them. All over his home I have his picture. I take medicines from the doctor — but I never sleep at night. I am sick, sick. By God, I am dying. I want Iskandar."

There is nothing more to say and nothing more to discuss with Samira, certainly not the fact that, between May and August of 1985, dozens of Lebanese Muslims and Christians were kidnapped in west Beirut. And none of them was ever seen again.

## I never knew my son was in Hizbollah

Nakhla Soueidan did not know that her son, Samir, was a member of Hizbollah, the militant Islamic party, until he was killed.

SHE HOLDS the snapshot very tightly in her hands, as if it will bring her son back to life in the little room in the shams of Shiyah. The woman on the left of the picture is Nakhla herself in a white scarf, and the man on the right, his arm on her left wrist and staring into the camera with dull eyes, is her son Samir. When the photograph was taken, he had perhaps 12 hours left to live.

"We had a home in Chakra in the south and we had a place here in Beirut," Nakhla says. "We were always moving. When the shelling got bad here, we went down south. Then, when the Israelis invaded, we came back to Beirut. Samir was a good boy, but as the years went by he became very religious. He started reading the Koran and other religious books. He sat up all night reading the Koran. I would find him there in the early hours, reading to himself."

His wooden table is still in the house, religious texts stacked across it with red and green spines and titles in gold leaf. "He was going to be an architect but he became very angry at all that was happening, at our suffering. He went to the mosque very often to pray and he would go away for long periods. He never told us what he was doing but we guessed he had joined the resistance. We never knew he was in Hizbollah until he was killed. I think he used to go away for training. Our family is not with Hizbollah but he thought very seriously about God and he was very strict and he wanted to fight Israel."

There are old family portraits of Samir in the room, all carrying a black bar across the top left-hand corner. In strange contrast, there is

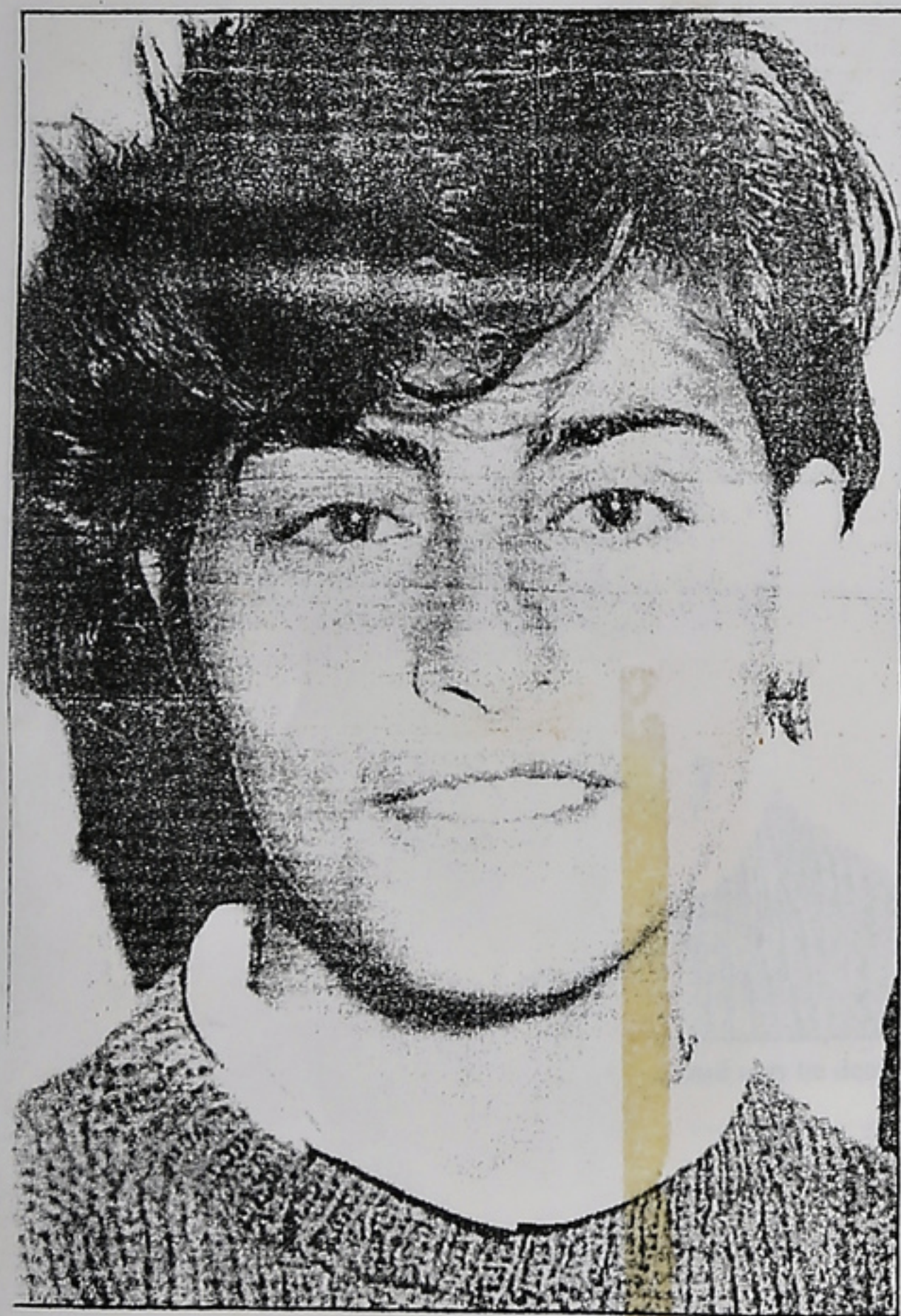
gone, we just left it there. You can have it if you want it and take it away with you. Samir was like that. He was so serious.

"In the summer of 1989, we were back in Chakra, in the village. He was very popular there. He was head of the village football team. One day — I remember he had been playing football in the afternoon —

realised he would be leaving that night. So we had the picture taken, with me not knowing the reason why. Next morning, we were listening to the Israeli radio news in Arabic and we heard there'd been an operation, that three resistance men had attacked an Israeli position near our village. The radio said one of

died," Nakhla says. "We know that Hizbollah came later and offered help us with money. But we said didn't want it. We are not Hizbollah family and we don't want money — we want our son back."

Back? Nakhla retreats into a narrow, unlighted corridor of her home. "We heard from..." — and



Aspiring assassin: Souhad Bshara was jailed, beaten and may be dead



Nakhla Soueidan cradles a photograph of herself and her dead son, Samir

Photographs: Robert Fisk