Ann Törnkvist

Follow F***ING ORDERS

THE GANGLAND EXECUTION OF A SWEDISH FOOTBALL STAR

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Methodology

FOLLOW FUCKING ORDERS is based on interviews with witnesses, crime victims and their families, the gang leader and his friends, old classmates, teachers, with town hall politicians and public servants, the police, lawyers, the lead prosecutor, social secretaries and others who have followed the case. Several have asked not to be identified.

Source documents include the police case file, including testimonies from witnesses who have not been interviewed, the two District Court verdicts as well as the Appeals Court verdict, Dany Moussa's 1994 verdict, Bernard Khouri's criminal record and prison service documentation pertaining to his imprisonment, Khouri's letters to me and his letter to the appeals trial, and newspaper and magazine articles.

The football chapters were written with input from sports journalists.

A fact checker was employed.

All quotes are translated from Swedish apart from Milad's quotes as he spoke to me in English, *you know*.

Character gallery

The Network
Bernard Khouri, gang leader, known as Al Taweel, 'The Tall One' in Arabic.

His predecessor, Bülent 'The Godfather' Aslanoglu.

Abraham 'The Torpedo' Aho, Khouri's younger cousin and alleged assassin.

Sherbel Said, another of Khouri's cousins, paralysed in a drive-by shooting.

'Travolta', a young mafia errand boy and poet.

The Family
Yaacoub Moussa, eldest son in the Moussa family, manager of The Oasis, married father of four.

Dany, one of the middle sons, the black sheep of the family who set up X-Team in Södertälje.

Georges, who attacked a boy at school after his older brother Dany gave him a knife.

Eddie, the youngest, their mother's 'favourite child' and rising star in Assyriska FF.

Alexandra, one of their sisters.

Mohaned Ali, Dany's friend, X-Team member and a debt enforcer, father of three.

The Dead
Yaacoub, Eddie and Mohaned.

The Cicerone
Philip*, 'poker genius' and drug addict, with friends on both sides of the conflict, who witnessed the murders of the Moussa brothers.

The Extorted
Milad Bahnan, indebted small-business owner, married father of one.

His brother Bahnan, manager of The Parrot café.

Oritha Chabo, whose brother borrowed money from the wrong people.

Her eldest son Leon, who was born with a muscular disease.

Leon's personal assistant, who prefers not to be named.

The Kidnapped
Georges Abo, former owner of a car used in a drive-by shooting.

The Investigators
Gunnar Appelgren, superintendent and lead detective.

Björn Frithiof, lead prosecutor.

Alice Ekengren, beat police officer in Södertälje.

The Lawyers
Fredrik Ungerfält, Khouri's defence lawyer.

Jan Karlsson and Elsa Svalsten, The Torpedo's defence lawyers.

Claes Borgström, legal counsel for the Moussa family.

The Club
Conny Chamas, devoted Assyriska FF fan and long-time admirer of Eddie Moussa.

Aydin Aho, club director of Assyriska FF.

Andreas Haddad, team-mate and close friend of Eddie.

In the Stands
Issa*, small-fry gambler who witnessed the double murder.

Tony Khouri, Khouri's estranged uncle.

Özcan Kaldoyo, Assyria TV contributor and opinion writer.

Jakob Rohyo, furniture store owner, witness to Khouri assaulting a police officer.

Hosep*, witness to Eddie attacking one of Khouri's friends with a kebab skewer.

Olle Eriksson, editor of *Filen*, a magazine for prison inmates.

Ellinor Persson, Djurgården IF board member.

*To protect their identities, Philip, Issa and Hosep asked that their real names not be used.

PART ONE

THE BOSS

2013

Forgive me

'YOU CAN tell from the way Bernard Khouri looks at you that he is always angry. Not even Jesus can help him,' says Milad Bahnan.

No one could tell from his calm, average-kind-of-guy drawl that this middle-aged father of one holds the fate of a town in his hands; hands now busy lighting a cigarette – I can tell because I can hear the click of the lighter and the crackle of paper as the cigarette catches fire, and after exhaling Milad picks up the story. It's a long one.

Milad knows the dangers of owing money to men like Khouri. It is so dangerous that he has had to flee his beloved but crime-addled hometown Södertälje, just south of the Swedish capital Stockholm, in order to testify against Khouri, the alleged leader of 'The Network'.

The upcoming high-profile trial has been years in the making and the police are now wrapping up the most extensive investigation into organised crime in Swedish history. Witnesses such as Milad, who has defied the town's code of silence, are key to helping the prosecutors end Khouri's reign.

Milad, a small-business owner who borrowed money from the wrong people, has taken refuge in the police's witness protection programme. New name, new social security number, and the same for his wife and their daughter. And they're not alone; more and more victims have come forward, all being spirited away by the police to keep them safe.

The police talk about the tipping point, when enough people at last say 'enough is enough'. The lead detective likens the thaw

in the case, with ever more people coming to the police for help, to a local Arab Spring, when protestors felt they had found safety in numbers. Never before have the Swedish police helped so many witnesses move and change their identities to feel safe enough to take the stand in court.

There's good reason for their fear. Milad has tasted The Network's wrath: a few years back he was assaulted with a captive bolt pistol, the kind used in abattoirs, and he still has trouble sleeping, but he's alive to guide me through the maze of threats, the never-ending demands to pay protection money, taking out loans to make the payments, getting new loans to cover the old ones, seeing 'fines' added to interest rates, handing over envelopes with cash once a month until he had no money left to put food on the table for his wife and kid – the shame he felt and why he kept quiet for so long. And he takes time to explain that the alleged gang leader has a theatrical bent and love of violence, expressed in grandiose fashion, that has made Khouri the most sought-after debt collector in town.

'The loan sharks who came before him were reasonable, you could talk to them, but have you ever looked Khouri in the eyes?' Milad asks me. I haven't, but I will soon as Khouri has granted my request for an interview.

'Khouri is on my list,' Milad says.

'What list?'

'I keep a list of everyone who has made my life hell. I'll celebrate when they end up in prison ... or when they die.'

At this point, there's still no certainty that the police and the prosecutor will see Khouri jailed for the crimes he stands accused of. There's a lack of forensic evidence tying Khouri directly to his alleged crimes, a weakness in the case that worries some of the victims' lawyers. Will the charges of usury, extortion, intimidation and assault stick? Fear can silence the best of us, and Khouri's not just a loan shark, he is being charged with ordering three murders.

The most infamous killing was the execution of a famous up-and-coming football player, Eddie Moussa, who was shot 17 times

with a Kalashnikov, the semi-automatic Soviet rifle that has been gaining popularity in the criminal underworld.

Milad and his persecutors belong to the Assyrian and Aramean community in Södertälje – Orthodox Christians from the Middle East – and the local police note that the community's insularity is problematic; there's a culture of silence that makes pariahs out of 'snitches' who go to the police. Milad confirms the observation that Khouri and his men only threatened and harassed their kinsmen, because people in their community would rather turn to trusted mediators than to the authorities. By extension, that habit stoked impunity. Being told to behave by a community elder is not the same as being locked up: Khouri thought he'd never get caught.

As Milad and I continue our long phone call, I can hear telltale sounds in the background that he's out driving. 'Do you have a crucifix in the car, hanging from the rear-view mirror, like so many Arameans in Sweden have?' I ask. 'Of course,' Milad says, a smile embedded in the tone of his voice.

He pauses. He lights another cigarette, and it sounds like he's looking for a parking spot. I can hear the ticking of the indicators, the car slowing down. Then the engine dies. Faintly, car doors being closed? A parking lot … followed by the metallic whine as a train brakes upon arriving at a station?

These sounds could be reaching me from the north, maybe from the south. I don't know where his family live nowadays in this vast country, equal in size to California and almost to Spain. Milad did say that I was welcome to visit, to grab a coffee, or take a ride through the countryside. He sounds lonely and bored, like he wouldn't mind a change of routine, but I don't want to know where he is. It's safer that way, for him and his family, and for me. What you don't know won't kill you, as the Americans say.

Milad happens to sound just like an American. He lived in the US for a few years before moving to Södertälje and still prefers to speak English rather than Swedish, which he didn't really have to learn because he was surrounded by his compatriots – Milad was

born in Syria and many of his former neighbours in Södertälje hail from Lebanon and Turkey.

Many speak Arabic but their mother tongue is Assyrian, the language of the Orthodox Christians. Many community members call Södertälje the new capital city of a people who can trace their lineage back to Mesopotamia – some refer jokingly to the town as 'Mesopotälje'.

Milad explains why he left the US for Sweden, speaking unhurriedly at the small-town pace common outside America's big cities. Adding a 'you know' to the end of every other sentence, he tells me that New Jersey was beautiful – the wetlands of the north yielding to forests and fields, the hills bordering Pennsylvania, the beaches by the ocean where the siren song of Atlantic City lures hunters of fortune. But, he says, it was just too vast and couldn't cater to his longing for his people – while speaking English he uses the Swedish word 'syrian' to name his people – not to be confused with being a citizen of Syria – often translated into Aramean, rather than the term 'assyrier'. Although there are those who think the divide, most common in Sweden, between Arameans and Assyrians has no historical justification: they're the same people[1].

Regardless, he felt lonely in New Jersey. 'There are Arameans in the United States as well, but they live so far apart from each other, you know. I was tired of driving. When I came to Södertälje, I felt so happy that so many of us lived in the same place.'

Södertälje, an old spa resort turned industrial hub, is the biggest town in Södermanland, one of the country's most picturesque counties with hundreds of Viking rune stones and thousands of the red cottages with white window frames so iconic for Sweden.

Here, Milad was given a new townscape to learn by heart. The small marina, the cobblestone central square overlooked by the District Court, which is housed in an angular modernist behemoth.

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1 The terms are used interchangeably in the book depending in part on which term the interviewee has used.

The salt tang of Baltic Sea air arrives from the east, as do the container ships that squeeze through the canal past downtown's grand, turn-of-last-century houses towards Lake Mälaren. It's a town where the wealthy teach their children to sail on the lake's mud-green swell, while the less prosperous kids ride mopeds along asphalt paths that snake between the monotone hulks of public housing.

The mafia use Audis that shuttle them the half-hour north to the upper-class watering holes in Stockholm, spending evenings dedicated to booze and coke, to seeing and being seen, to power and prestige. To toasting their wealth.

Södertälje is not a big town compared with the cities Milad left behind in the United States, and also in Syria, but the community spirit made up for it, not least in the neighbourhoods of Ronna and Hovsjö, home to many Assyrians and Arameans. Nor is it a poor town. Shoals of commuters arrive in rush hour, the commuter trains passing the global headquarters of Scania, the world's fifth-biggest truck manufacturer, founded here in 1911. A walk under the bridge leads to the labs and offices of pharmaceutical giant Astra, which after a merger became AstraZeneca.

While still plagued by socio-economic divides, there are jobs in Södertälje and opportunities to be had for small-business owners, such as Milad, catering to the throng. Yet despite its multi-layered history, Södertälje has become synonymous with organised crime. But back then, when he first moved here, Milad still had years of happiness ahead of him: Sunday lunch with his parents, drinking coffee with friends, playing cards at his brother's café. Milad got married and became a father. When Milad drove his car up the gentle incline of Robert Anbergs Street, he would pass Khouri's old school, then on past The Oasis café, run by the famous footballer Eddie Moussa's brother. Satellite dishes picking up foreign cable stations sprouted like fibreglass mushrooms from Ronna's flat-faced buildings. As Milad continued, down the other side of the hill, toward the St Ephrem Syriac Orthodox Cathedral, each and every passing car had a crucifix hanging from the rear-view mirror. Milad was no longer alone.

But that was a long time ago now. He left Syria because he wanted to, leaving the US was a choice, but leaving Södertälje was the only option left to him because he feared for his life – a dark irony, as Södertälje has been, since the early 1970s, a safe harbour for so many who escaped the discrimination of ethnic minorities in the Middle East. But here, Milad found out that oppression can shed its skin.

'Your book shouldn't be about Khouri,' he says in a light-hearted manner that cannot conceal his sadness.

'What do you mean?'

'It should be about me.'

Milad is not wrong. In the media limelight, victims are crowded out by Khouri, who appears more than happy to take centre stage. It's the charismatic Khouri who has become a celebrity. It's Khouri whose friends have used his alleged diagnosis as a psychopath to boost his reputation and instil fear. It's Khouri who gives interviews about the upcoming trial, explaining to any reporter willing to listen why he's convinced that the charges won't stick – and we all do listen, because we are fascinated by this historic case.

While Milad's name can appear in print too, it's only because 'Milad' is no longer his name on paper – his new identity is meant to make him unfindable. When curious police officers ask me how I got hold of Milad, they get only vague answers from me. An older police officer, born and bred in Södertälje, reacts with less surprise than his less-experienced colleagues at Milad letting himself be found. 'The biggest danger to a person in witness protection is the person himself,' he tells me. 'Especially over time, once the trial is over. They think that people forget, that people forgive. They miss their family, their friends, they go back home to visit. They get sloppy.'

Milad knows this to be true. Some nights, when the loss and longing rob him of sleep, he sets off for Södertälje but always pulls the car over when he gets within 100 kilometres of his old town. He has established a safety perimeter, sitting close to tears on the motorway's hard shoulder.

Yet he doesn't even feel 100 per cent safe in his new hometown. 'You know how it works, gangs send each other pictures of people they want to take revenge on. There might be some gang around here, you know, that got sent my picture,' he says. 'And sometimes I think that I see Khouri's friends when I'm out driving.'

Those friends also get attention in the media, as do the people they now stand accused of having killed: the first mention always goes to the football player Eddie Moussa from the Södertälje club Assyriska FF, an underdog team that fought themselves into the top national league, the 'immigrant team' that both *The Guardian* and *Le Monde* have written about.

For years to come, Eddie's death will continue to be eulogised in headlines, because fame sells, and his celebrity ensures that the turf war in Södertälje sticks in the nation's collective memory.

So does the brutality of that summer's night. As Eddie fell lifeless to the floor, his body so peppered with bullets that the first responders would say they'd never seen anything like it, a second gunman walked up to Eddie's brother Yaacoub and shot him three times in the throat.

The double murder served up a smorgasbord of macabre details: Kalashnikov, check. Dead sports star, check. His brother executed at close range, check. Ricochets, check. Upended chairs as more than a dozen witnesses fled the scene in panic, check. A hit meticulous in both planning and execution, check. Mopeds at the ready to ferry the killers from the scene, check.

The suspects can deny the charges all they want, but after the police rounded up Khouri and his suspected accomplices and stuck them in jail cells to await the trial, one of his young foot soldiers cracked under pressure. The wardens found a note in the teenage boy's cell:

Forgive Me Eddie n Jacob
I didn't know Please
I'm sorry
when I ask the Police

was there a lot of blood
he said Yes
not even in a film have I seen so much blood
and never in my 30 years as a police officer

But there's no smoking gun – *not yet* – that ties Khouri himself to the crime scene. So maybe Khouri's right, maybe he will walk?