

Two Years Later: What the Syrian War Looks Like
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Two years ago, Syria was a very different place. In early March, 2011, a group of boys in the southern city of Daraa brazenly scribbled graffiti criticizing Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria. The words included the mantra of revolution that had ricocheted from Tunisia to Egypt, from Yemen to Bahrain: "The people want the fall of the regime." The authorities' response was as swift as it was predictable: the boys were detained and tortured.

On March 15, 2011, some people in Daraa took to the streets to demand the boys' release. There were also small demonstrations in other parts of Syria, including in the capital city, Damascus, where rumblings of discontent had slowly become more pronounced over the preceding weeks. Those demonstrations were the beginning.

Two years later, Syria is at war. What does the Syrian war look like? It looks like shells that crash and thud and thump into residential streets, sometimes with little warning. It looks like messy footprints in a pool of blood on a hospital floor as armed local men, many in mismatched military attire and civilian clothing, rush in their wounded colleagues, or their neighbors.

It's a hospital foyer bursting with armed men trying to find out who is hurt, who is dead, and what is happening. A young boy and a girl, siblings, covered in a fine dust. They're hurriedly patched up and walked out of the hospital to make way for a stream of others. The Syrian war sounds like women asking about their sons.

And it sounds like a hospital generator that hums and sputters and cuts out because there's no diesel to run it, or because the diesel is too expensive. A doctor pauses, waiting for the power to come back on, before he resumes stitching the scalp at the base of a little girl's skull. There's no anesthetic. Her short, curly black hair is still in pigtails, tied with pink bands. Her name is Tala, and she is screaming for her mother. Her father hurriedly pulls aside the blood-spattered green curtain that delineates the tiny consulting room from a slightly larger one, where an elderly man and a woman are lying on the blood-streaked floor. They are bleeding into the floor, creating new pools of blood. Médecins Sans Frontières says that medical structures are targeted and destroyed and that health-care workers are killed for doing their job, creating the need for secret field clinics that are usually poorly stocked.

The Syrian war looks, too, like dusty shoes spilling out of a cardboard box by the open door of a deserted, partially destroyed home in a town that, like many, is devoid of civilians. The box is near a child's black-ink drawing on the wall, of a helicopter. There are a little girl's white sneakers with blue butterflies near a woman's black wedge-heeled slipper, a man's lace-up dress shoes, and a toddler's orange patent-leather sandals. Things are in their place; their owners are gone. It also looks like things that are out of place, like a kitchen sink in somebody's grassy, rubble-carpeted garden. The Syrian war looks like the millions of people who have become refugees or are internally displaced. It looks like others who say they'd rather die in their homes than live off of handouts in a tent.

What does the Syrian war look like? It looks like significant number of people who, for reasons of ideology or patronage or fear, believe that Assad's regime the best option. It looks like a growing number of people, even those within the rebel ranks, who eye the increasing clout of Jihadists and other Islamists and fear what they may turn Syria into.

What does the Syrian war sound like? It sounds like the women of an extended family, aunts and sisters, mothers and grandmothers, sitting in a room where thin mattresses line the walls, discussing what kind of a Syria they want to live in. They're in darkness because there's no electricity.

Mayada, a young, strong-willed, English-literature major, says that, in her heart, she wants an Islamic state, but she recognizes that in Syria, a multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian society, that is unlikely. She says an Islamic state would be “more just.” Her aunt Sarea, who is just a few years older than her, snickers at her remarks. She won’t live in an Islamic state, she says. Unless that state is modelled on Turkey, it’ll be an excuse to lock women up in their homes.

The two women debate the issue for hours, and others chime in. In the end, they agree that an Islamic state is not the best option—not because Islam doesn’t grant rights to women but because the male clerics who interpret the religion cannot be trusted.

What does the Syrian war look like? It looks like armed men with little accountability. It looks like the amateur video of a local character known as the Yellow Man of Aleppo, an eccentric older man decked out in yellow, from his ivy cap to his shoes, being humiliated by young thugs who belong to a unit of the Free Syrian Army in the northern city. They accuse him of being a government spy, a fassfoos, in the local slang.

They spit on him, tell him to bark like a dog, make him repeat vulgarities about Assad’s female relatives. “Take a picture of me pulling his mustache,” a young, smiling, fresh-faced rebel tells the camera. They take turns plucking out hairs from his graying blond mustache. “Are you Sunni?” the cameraman asks the Yellow Man. “Do you like Alawites or do you hate them?” he asks, referring to the sect that Assad belongs to. “I hate them,” the Yellow Man replies. “Liar!” one of the young men says as he slaps the old man’s face. Some men may become what they are fighting.

What does the Syrian war look like? It looks like another amateur video, taken from the other side of this increasingly intractable divide. A man, bloodied and beaten, hands tied behind his back, is dragged along the gritty asphalt by uniformed, armed government soldiers. He’s wearing nothing but his white underwear. He cannot even lift his head, which scrapes along the street. He turns onto his back. “Where are your wife and children?” one of his tormentors asks, stepping on the man’s face with his black boot. Somebody asks for a piece of glass to cut the man’s tongue out. They curse him, mock him, and laugh as they torment him.

“For God’s sake, please, just let me say goodbye to my children,” the man says, knowing that his end is near. His face is swollen, bloodied. “Will you let me **** your wife?” one of his tormentors asks, mockingly. “If you let me, you can see your children.” “No,” the man says, “my wife is my soul, my children are my soul. My wife is the crown on my head.”

“The crown on your head?” He kicks the man’s head. Others laugh as they continue dragging him along the street, trying to decide where to dump him.

This is what the Syrian war looks like. Every man with a gun is an authority, and for some the enemy—who was once their neighbor—is no longer a person. How can a man who has inflicted such harm, and become used to that sort of power, let it go and step back—especially if others do not?

What does the Syrian war look like? It looks like ad-hoc rebel checkpoints set up along roads. As state authority disintegrates, other forms of power naturally emerge—a person’s surname, his tribal affiliation if he has one (and the size of his tribe)—can mean the difference between being harassed or being allowed to freely pass. Religious authorities come to the fore. It is natural, for example, that Sharia courts are trying to impose order on lawlessness. A person’s name or local accent can reveal a sectarian identity and, by extension, a presumed political view. People are being reduced to their base identity even as they also retreat into it.

What does the Syrian war sound like? It sounds like laughter, like people who can still find humor in their predicament and joke about it. Even as death becomes so commonplace that traditional mourning periods are shortened and rituals are overlooked, people learn to make do, to live with

their new reality. Have you heard the joke about the man who finds a magic lamp, rubs it, and a genie appears? “Your wish is my command,” the genie says. “Great,” the man says. “I need a bottle of cooking gas.” The following day, the man rubs the lamp again, summoning an irate genie. “What do you want?” the genie says. “I’ve run out of diesel,” the man says. “Couldn’t you wait a few days? Now I’ve lost my spot in the queue for cooking gas!”

Abu Mohanad was a first lieutenant in Assad’s army. He is a member of the minority Druze sect, and is now part of a unit of the Free Syrian Army. The other men jokingly call him “the Salafi Druze,” a religious oxymoron that plays on Assad’s branding of all his opponents as extreme Islamist Salafis and terrorists. He’d been married for only thirty-five days when he defected, and hasn’t seen his wife in over a year. Abu Mohanad’s unit cobbles together rockets from scavenged water pipes, fertilizer, and metal street signs, which are used for the fins. “In every place where we removed a street sign, we left somebody to offer directions!” Abu Mohanad’s colleague Abu Hussein says, laughing.

What is the Syrian war like? It is frightening, bloody, depressing, and sometimes uplifting. It is numbing. It is every human emotion on a heightened level. What does the Syrian war look like? Above all, it looks like the names and faces of the seventy thousand people the United Nations says have been killed in the two years since the uprising began. The real figure is likely much higher. The U.N. number is of those whose names or faces are known, and doesn’t include the countless others who are still missing, who may be in mass graves. At least seventy thousand people dead. That means seventy thousand individuals, each part of a family, each family part of a community, each community part of a country. That is what the Syrian war looks like.

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