

“It is easily said that numbers speak for themselves. Big numbers tend to rather conceal than disclose. When it comes to human lives, ‘one’ is still the digit and number that strikes a chord with us.”

HEINRICH BÖLL, 1976

“Everything written is written against death.”

HEINRICH BÖLL, 1959

Imprint

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Yours Truly, From Idlib

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OF FATHERS AND SONS	COVER STORY

Foreword

Civilians are, and remain to be, the overwhelming majority in a country experiencing conflict. For the Syrian province of Idlib, Syria's last rebel-held province, the United Nations established the number of civilians to be "more than 99%." However, only armed groups and actors make the news headlines. This has contributed to an international perception that "there are no good people left" in Syria.

This fails the far more complex reality. Instead of belittling, or even denying the relevance of civilians, we should talk more about them and acknowledge what they are doing in ever more difficult circumstances.

The photojournalist, Tim Alsiofi, was only 18 years old when the revolution began in Syria. The Syrians regime did not take it up for what it really was - as a political uprising of those excluded from having a say - but instead responded to it as security challenge to be subdued by any means.

The essential threat activists and journalists faced early on by the regime happened to be matched by another among the extremists on the opposition side, entirely in line with a dictatorial approach to citizens: bombing and torturing independent minds into submission in order to suffocate citizen-oriented activism.

In his hometown in besieged Ghouta, Tim spent the first years of his adult life documenting death and destruction before boarding one of the infamous "green buses"

of deportation to Idlib. Upon his arrival there, we asked him to show us life in that province. We did not know what to expect, but the first 153 photos Tim sent were breath-taking. So much colour, so much life we had not seen in a long time from inside Syria. Yet we were aware of the fact that these images, if not put into context, might feed into the misled debate on "return" in allegedly "safe" areas, when the more urgent question - absent from Western political debates - is how to find a way to help those trapped inside Syria, or if this could not be achieved: allow them out.

The deeper we dug with Tim into the stories of joy coupled with the losses, of hopes nipped in the bud yet re-emerging, the more we were convinced that this way, of not only sharing impressions but displaying the sweet and sour broader context of the reality behind these photos, really matters. For that, we paired Tim with Syrian writer and rapper Hani Al Sawah whose words helped create a personal narrative telling the story. The collaborative work speaks volumes about civilians doing what any civilian should be doing - living. Buying and selling. Diving into the unknown. Fishing. Barbecuing. Celebrating weddings and public holidays. Or for children: learning at school or simply spending time at a playground.

The Syrian regime keeps insisting it wants to take back "every single inch of

Syria.” Whether or not it will, in the end, embark on a military offensive against Idlib is at the time of this writing, not predictable. However, “freezing” the situation is not realistic for civilians in Idlib because of international aid trickling down – a situation that is prone to exacerbate civilian suffering in an area which hosts on top of its inhabitants more than one million internally displaced. So the question of how to help and support them remains imminent.

All those men, women and children portrayed in this volume do not live their life as if there was no tomorrow. On the contrary: They act as if today was only the beginning of a brighter future. We can't but admire their strength and resilience, and we perceive it as our duty carrying out their words and these rare insights into the world.

This book is a monument to all women and men who defy this nihilist equation of “either with or against us” by their strong belief in a better future and all their efforts to make it happen. It is a reminder that life will always prevail over death.

DR. BENTE SCHELLER, NADINE ELALI AND ROUA ARAKJI

Preface

I was 18 years old when the uprising began in Syria. Today, I am 25 years old, and throughout the past 7-8 years, I have done nothing but document.

After the first chemical attack on Ghouta in 2013, I became aware that the regime was trying to change the narrative about what is happening in Syria. So, I began building my photo archive documenting what life looked like under siege in order to ensure that the regime would not jeopardize the truth and rewrite history on its own terms.

I did not go to school and study photography, everything I know is self-taught. I developed my techniques on my own, and my photos are a work of experience. I believe that the photo speaks volumes and consider it a means to argue the truth and the last defense we have against all the fake news the regime is generating.

I had my life on pause until this book. I felt responsible towards everyone living here in Syria, and so I thought this is the needed opportunity to make their stories heard. I felt hopeful and content to see at this moment that the past years of my life have not gone to waste and that I was able to contribute to some form of change.

The media covers mainly one side of the story, the part that is made out of military strikes, numbers of people killed, numbers of refugees, and the attention with which it is rewarding negotiations pretending they

would not be determined to fail. Little do they cover people's day to day stories that have no choice but to be in this situation. In this book, I delve into the personal reality that exists between the lines, what media has failed to capture.

I tells stories from both Ghouta and Idlib. I was forced to leave Ghouta in the first half of 2018. Now I am in Idlib documenting life as it unfolds. We live in great fear that Idlib will be facing the same fate as Ghouta.

It is crucial therefore to show that there are civilians living here, millions of them, who have experienced so much tragedy and yet they still carry on with their lives. It is vital for them to get support and not be labeled as terrorists and extremists merely for having opposed Bashar al-Assad and his rule.

The photos I captured looked nice aesthetically but their backstories were sad, and so I found excruciating tension between what I saw at first glance and what I learned when understanding the stories. The families I met, had at least one member who was either detained, missing or been killed. It would remind me of my father as he too is missing still. There was so much heartache as I came face to face with myself. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the images and the unknowing of what was going to happen, whether to me or the people I met.

I am not that much looking for sympathy for all the suffering we have gone through and continue to do so, but on the contrary, I want to show how strong my people are. All we need is some stability, freedom, and the needed resources and we will choose life over and over again.

TIM ALSIOFI

Introduction

I started my beautiful endeavor with this book when I offered my friend Nadine Elali to edit the texts Tim had written captioning his photos and the stories of people he captured in them.

I am attached to my people - the active ones - and I always follow my passion to collaborate with them on projects, particularly when the project partner takes a different approach in dealing with our issues...

“The image.” Tim’s eye captures the tragedy in death and talks of much beauty thereon. It tells the story of people and its utmost concern is to be faithful to what it sees. It documents their stories and arranges them chronologically, marking each event, as if opening a history book and highlighting the most important or memorable parts.

But Tim is not a writer, and his concern was to bring his image to light in the way he wanted to, and so the texts he wrote were more of a descriptive nature and did not do the image justice. I asked him to turn it into a literal narration that would complement the image in value without compromising the simplicity of the texts nor modifying the facts contained therein. And this book came to be.

HANI AL SAWAH

First there was displacement

I did not carry a bullet shield or a helmet in my camera bag, nor did I write a farewell letter to my friends and relatives to leave it behind on my bed, in case I was injured or killed. Those had become part of my daily rituals, but I feel somewhat safe here in Idlib.

This is my first outing with my friends and their family members since we arrived. I hadn't seen a lake in almost ten years. The joy almost robbed me of my task, but then I went back to taking pictures in order to capture the difference between what I saw here in Idlib and what I had seen in Ghouta. It is a story that I will tell the curious, frame by frame.





Then, there were new people



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When I first met them, the locals from Midanki, they were filling up water from the lake and transporting it to nearby towns to water the trees and crops there. The residents here volunteer to take care of the land for nothing in return. Their urge to do so, it is much like their insistence to choose life every time, despite the war and the many conflicts they've experienced between armed groups. Despite having lost the most in this war, civilians managed not to lose their sense of humanity.



Making little breakthroughs



ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ————— MIDANKI LAKE
SUMMER 2018 ————— EID AL FITR

This is Abu Shaker and three of his children playing in the water. Their first holiday in seven years without war, and so they wanted to experience it, for what it really is. These few hours felt much like a lifetime to all of us. We were trying to do everything we had been deprived of. We fished, hunted, and swam like little children and took pictures with our mobile phones. This trip was a successful attempt to overcome, even if only a little, the sadness that had taken over us.



This is Shaker, Abu Shaker's son, he is 12 years old. He saw the lake for the first time. It was a whole new world for him. He was happy; stayed in the water all day trying to catch fish.

Trusting to the waters



ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ——— MIDANKI LAKE
SUMMER 2018 ——— EID AL FITR

This is Ahmad in the photo making the jump. He is 24-year-old, and he is also from Ghouta. When I asked him how he dared to jump in the lake, he said that it wasn't going to be more dangerous than being back home. To swim across a deep lake, felt more safe for Ahmad than having to walk 10 meters in Ghouta's street.



Knowing life is sweeter near the bone

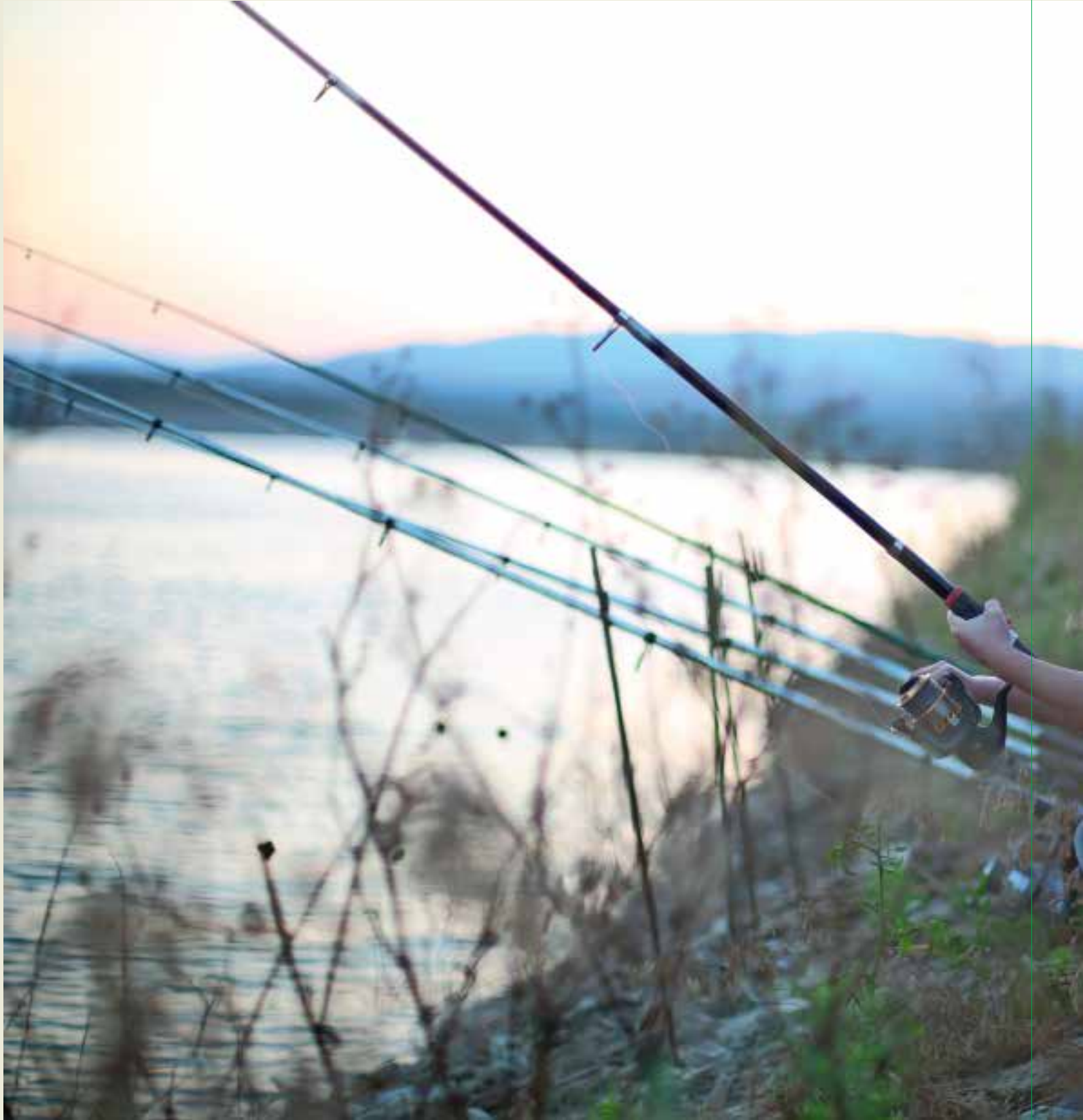
Shaher is a pharmacist from Douma. He is taking photos and sending them to his friends who are living abroad. His enthusiasm to send them was met with colder reactions than he had expected. But of course! These areas charm us, those who have been living in siege ... but they seem quite ordinary to those who lived outside siege.



ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ——— MIDANKI LAKE
SUMMER 2018 ——— EID AL FITR



Everyone gathered around to learn how to fish. The fisherman from North Aleppo explained the different techniques, between using a fishing net and a fishing rod, before he started boasting about his young daughter, who he said was more of a professional fisherman than we were.



ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ——— MIDANKI LAKE
SUMMER 2018 ——— EID AL FITR



Here she is, his daughter, Asala (meaning 'honey') around 8 years old, the same "professional fisherman" now teaching me how to use a fishing rod.

We are torn between our borders



Iskander from Douma. He lost all his possessions during the revolution. As soon as he reached Idlib, he suffered from a heart attack and was transferred to Turkey for treatment. He recovered and then returned to Syria. He is determined to stay and find joy.





ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ————— MIDANKI LAKE
SUMMER 2018 ————— EID AL FITR

Bilal, holding the phone, is 25 years old. He was injured during airstrikes and hospitalized for nine months due to a big wound he suffered to his abdomen. His older brother, Raed, is twenty-nine years old carrying his newborn child. The brothers lost their father a few months ago. When we left Ghouta, their mother stayed behind because she could not withstand the long distance travel up north nor the risk that it entailed. This picture is for her, to reassure her that there was no war where they were staying now.

A picnic, or what is commonly referred to as a “barbecue.” If we wanted to have one during the siege in Ghouta, it would cost around 500 Euros. That is if we were able to find meat to grill to begin with. I had a friend who worked hard for three months to save up enough money to have one, only to be injured on the day he was having the barbecue, taken by surprise by airstrikes. He never managed to eat it. If you were in Idlib today my friend, I would have held a festive barbecue in your honor.

Eyes on Sham

ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ————— MIDANKI LAKE
SUMMER 2018 ————— EID AL FITR

Little Sham, always keeping herself at a safe distance, close to her father, so that she could run and hide under his arm if she hears anything unfamiliar, like a woodpecker for example. In the shelter, she was always crying, but today, I saw Sham laugh!





Where the trees are besieged

ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ————— MIDANKI LAKE
SUMMER 2018 ————— EID AL FITR





ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ——— MIDANKI LAKE
SUMMER 2018 ——— EID AL FITR



I pondered over the pictures I was taking of everyone here. They were very different from those I remembered of them. They all had painful stories I remember well. I looked around at the trees. A year ago, I broke my bed into pieces to use its wood for a fire to cook and stay warm. Firewood was more precious than gold during the siege.

Ghouta whose vast orchards were the very breath surrounding the capital became barren land. Will the war come after us here in Idlib? Will we live another siege and burn our trees once more? Will the farmers here become paramedics as our farmers did? Cursed is war!

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— QUWATLI STREET
————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————



I conjured up images of children in Douma collecting broken branches of the old pine. The tree was not spared either. Despite our need for warmth, we couldn't cut down a tree over a hundred years old, not out of respect to its age, but because it was our only cover from the snipers positioned at the end of Quwatli Street near the municipality, an area controlled by the regime. We were protecting each other until Russian airstrikes brought it to the ground.

Where people starved



Flashback: "In Ghouta, we were like skeletons moving in the city's emptiness."

There was no water in this city's tanks...Residents went to nearby wells during the little time they had in between the rounds of airstrikes and attacks, to fill up as much water as they could carry to the shelters they supply.



GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— QUWATLI STREET
————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————



Happiness is a handful of wheat flour





GHOUTA, DOUMA ——— KHOURSHIED STREET

————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————

The siege is a bitter and sheer struggle.

Our markets were void of food and of merchants, except for those who sold corn or barley bread. Regime and Russian airstrikes were targeting Ghouta's cities relentlessly, so residents resorted to making bread out of cattle feed...Douma's 300-year-old mill - somewhat archeological - was grinding corn grains and the younger mills were grinding the feed. We would be happy when we had a handful of wheat with which we could make

a real loaf of bread out of... Very much like the child in the picture carrying a loaf made out of wheat flour.





To beg the bigger question



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GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— QUWATLI STREET

————— WINTER 2014 —————

“The bread owner is dead, and his blood is still warm on the bread, and you're going to steal it?”

Someone put this hungry child in a moral dilemma: Does he look through the blood-soaked cart for a loaf of bread that he could still eat? Or? ...

The child turned back, hungry still, leaving death with its toll...postponing answering the bigger questions to another day.



Something of the marvelous in endurance

DAMASCUS, JOBAR ————— MANTOU SOUK (MARKET)

————— WINTER 2016 —————



Abu Salah, 63 years old, one of Ghouta's most recognizable businessmen before the revolution. Despite the simplicity of raw materials needed for the making of prosthetic limbs, like plastic and iron, their cost was considerably high, and so, Abu Salah who traded in steel used all he had owned to manufacture different kinds of prosthetic limbs. The center he helped set up, was providing these parts to whoever was injured for free, while Gouta was systematically denied of any form of medical aid and assistance. The regime's checkpoint at the entrance to Ghouta would detain anyone carrying simple medical aid or any types of analgesics as trivial as Paracetamol!



Abu Ali, 55 years old, a tradesman who owned a chain of stores that sold women clothing in Souk Mantou, an old market in Damascus. He and his wife had no children of their own and so, he invested all his time and energy in expanding his line of business. After losing it all, Abu Ali would put on his traditional outfit and stroll down the street, painting an image of the market he knew before the war, on the rubble it had left behind. Imagination will have its share the day we rebuild our country.



So far as to deny us our right to light

Ghouta was turning into ravaged land one day after another. This is an image of al-Jalaa Street, once considered the most active market in Douma, and the third biggest commercial market in all of Syria. The merchants who worked here have either left the country, or been detained, or have lost their wealth to the war. Only cart owners remained, mainly those selling diesel. They would set up their stalls at night to dodge the airstrikes of the day. This cart owner dimmed down the light on his only source of living, to take cover from pilots' vision, but one pilot saw it and killed the owner and his brother who were standing under it.

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— AL-JALAA STREET
————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————





The life we knew so well

IDLIB ————— SARAKEB SOUK (MARKET)

————— SUMMER 2018 —————

City markets bustle with life every day, and in Idlib, they are no different.





IDLIB ————— SARAKEB SOUK (MARKET)
————— SUMMER 2018 —————

Everything that we had longed for during the siege on Ghouta was available here in this city's market. Wheat bread, Shawarma, meat, fruits, - staple food before 2011 - all at reasonable prices comparatively. These modest markets are a source destination for all of the city's residents, arriving as early as 5 o'clock in the morning, and leaving at sunset as its stalls pack up and close. It is run mostly by family-owned businesses such as those in the pictures which make bread, sell falafel sandwiches and cook bean dishes. I wonder if Ghouta will see life like this again.

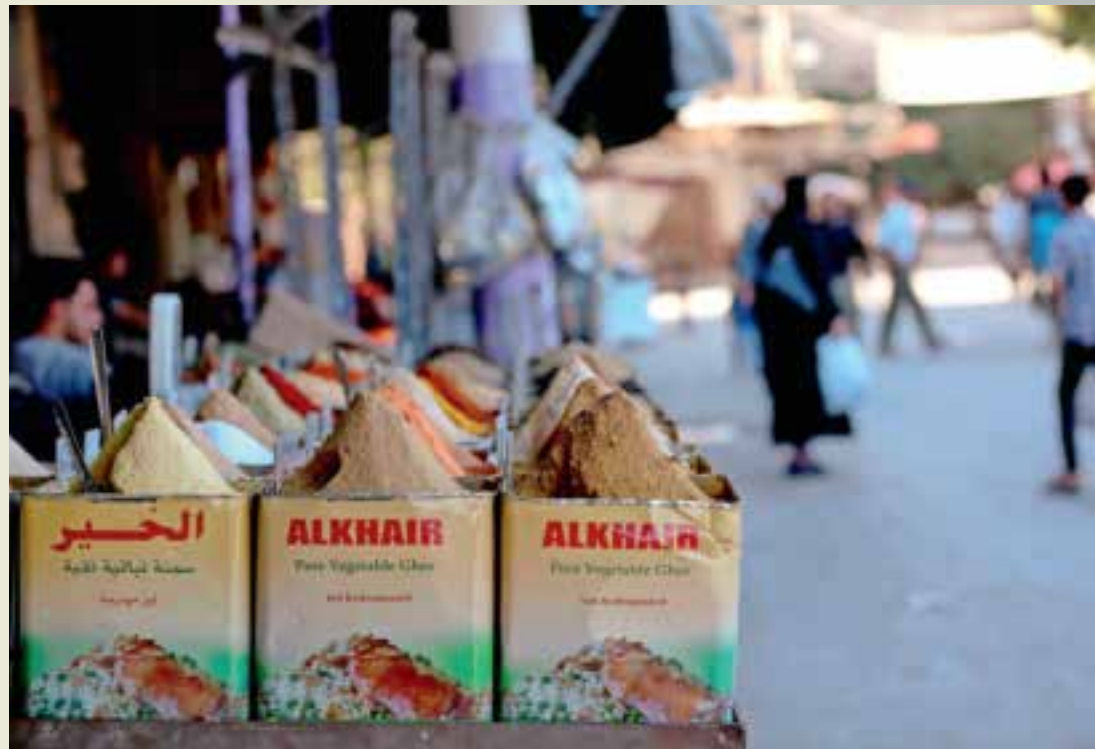




Overrun by injustice

IDLIB ————— SARAKEB SOUK (MARKET)
————— SUMMER 2018 —————

Once more, my thoughts creep up on me as the smell of spices whiff through the air. The last time I had smelled peppers, it was when the regime bombarded the popular market in Ghouta.





GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— AL-SHAABI SOUK (MARKET)

————— FALL 2015 —————

Douma's popular market was hit with bunker buster bombs by Russian warplanes. Around 300 civilians were killed in the attack. It was hard to imagine the magnitude of the disaster that followed until the dust settled. I saw hundreds of dying persons catch their last breath. I saw the hungry living eating food that the dead had left behind.... If you ask me, I can tell you that I saw injustice with my bare eyes, yet I could not get a hold of it.

We bury our loved ones in colored shrouds

DOUMA ————— POINT 200

————— FALL 2015 —————



Once a kindergarten, it became a temporary resting place for the dead before their bodies were carried away and buried. We called it Point 200. On the day of the attack, we used up all the white shrouds we had available, and so many families covered their dead in colored fabric, fabric available on the market for the clothes for the living.



Have you ever imagined that one day, you would be looking among the dead for the face of your loved one? This man was not the only one looking for a familiar face. Behind the lens, a mother was looking for her son's, a father holding his child while searching for his wife's, a young man looking for his sweetheart's...The regime's media hailed the Russian pilot who bombed the market ... it claims three hundred terrorists, and we reclaim three hundred loved ones.

Because not all dreams come true



DOUMA ————— POINT 200
————— FALL 2015 —————

“I work on a cart selling biscuits, to be able to provide for my mother and my little siblings,” he once said to me... “I love to play, I hate airplanes, and I love school.” His dream was to take a day off work and play in the very same playground he now lay still in. He achieved his dream only after he had died.

Hassan's father is detained, and his mother is ill, making him the man of the house selling gasoline on a cart to provide for his family.

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— QUWATLI STREET
————— WINTER 2014 —————



Having to say goodbye

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— AL-MASAKEN

————— SPRING 2018 —————

Sad, having to say goodbye to the only people you've ever known; and happy...to be getting on the first bus to leave the siege. These children were born during the revolution, they don't know anything about life, except what they've seen of war and siege, and what they've heard about in bedtime stories.

Around a thousand and five hundred civilians left Ghouta that day, heading towards the Syrian North... Jaish al-Islam's leadership had refused to leave the city, and as a result, the regime launched a violent thirty-six-hour campaign of incessant airstrikes using all types of missiles. People later gathered near al-Jalaa Street so to be transferred by Jaish al-Islam buses to a checkpoint on the outskirts of Ghouta, to then get on regime buses that were to transport them to Hama's countryside.





To stay meant to reconcile

On the bus heading towards the regime's crossing, I think about what I had documented in Ghouta, I think about the files, the names, the hard discs that sum up an entire lifespan...I fear for it or for myself? For the first time in six years, I stand at a checkpoint for the regime. "Stay, and reconcile," they said. Who can accept reconciling with the army of the regime!?

As the convoy arrived at Adra's central prison vicinity, regime forces spread out and prevented us from moving forward. A dispute between the two armies over the regime's detainees with Jaish al-Islam led to our own detention at the same point for thirty hours during which only fear and anticipation prevailed. Jaish al-Islam released the detainees and the convoy moved toward the relatively safer North.

GHOUTA ————— SURROUNDING AREA OF ADRA PRISON
————— SPRING 2018 —————





We did not want to leave

GHOUTA, DOUMA — THE GREAT MOSQUE

WINTER 2017/2018

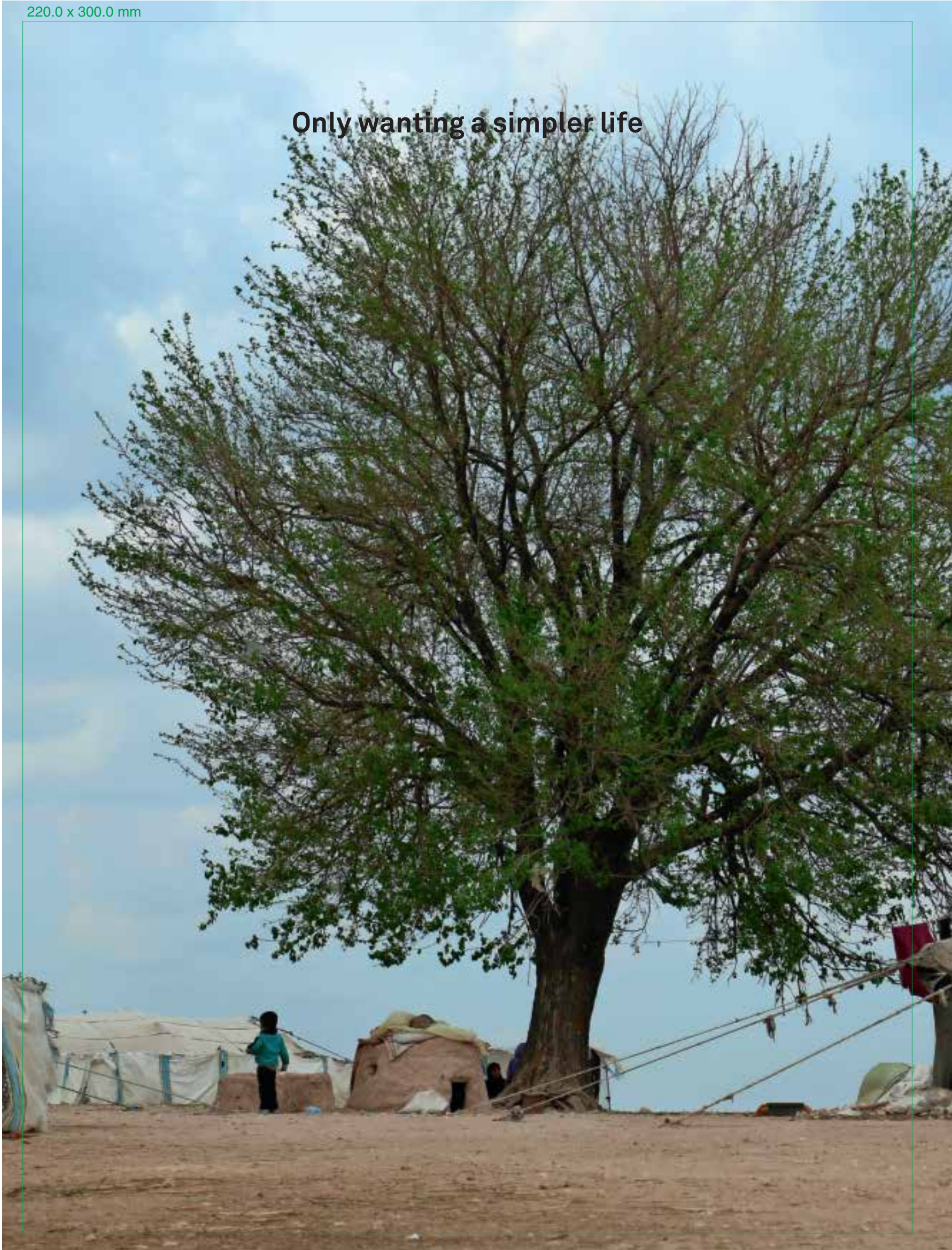
This was when the United Nations entered Douma after the regime had targeted the city with chemical weapons. We gathered in the hall of the Great Mosque where the first demonstration took place seven years ago. Our demands were simple: stop the shelling, allow the entry of bread, baby milk and medical supplies.

Observers saw with their own eyes the victims and the remnants of the missiles, they saw the destruction and the planes hovering back and forth on its way to bomb the city of Harasta. They did not move a finger. Even the aid they brought in with them was destroyed by Russian airstrikes shortly after the delegation's departure. The entire United Nations was unable to provide food, milk or medicine to people who were dying under siege, suffocating by internationally banned weapons.





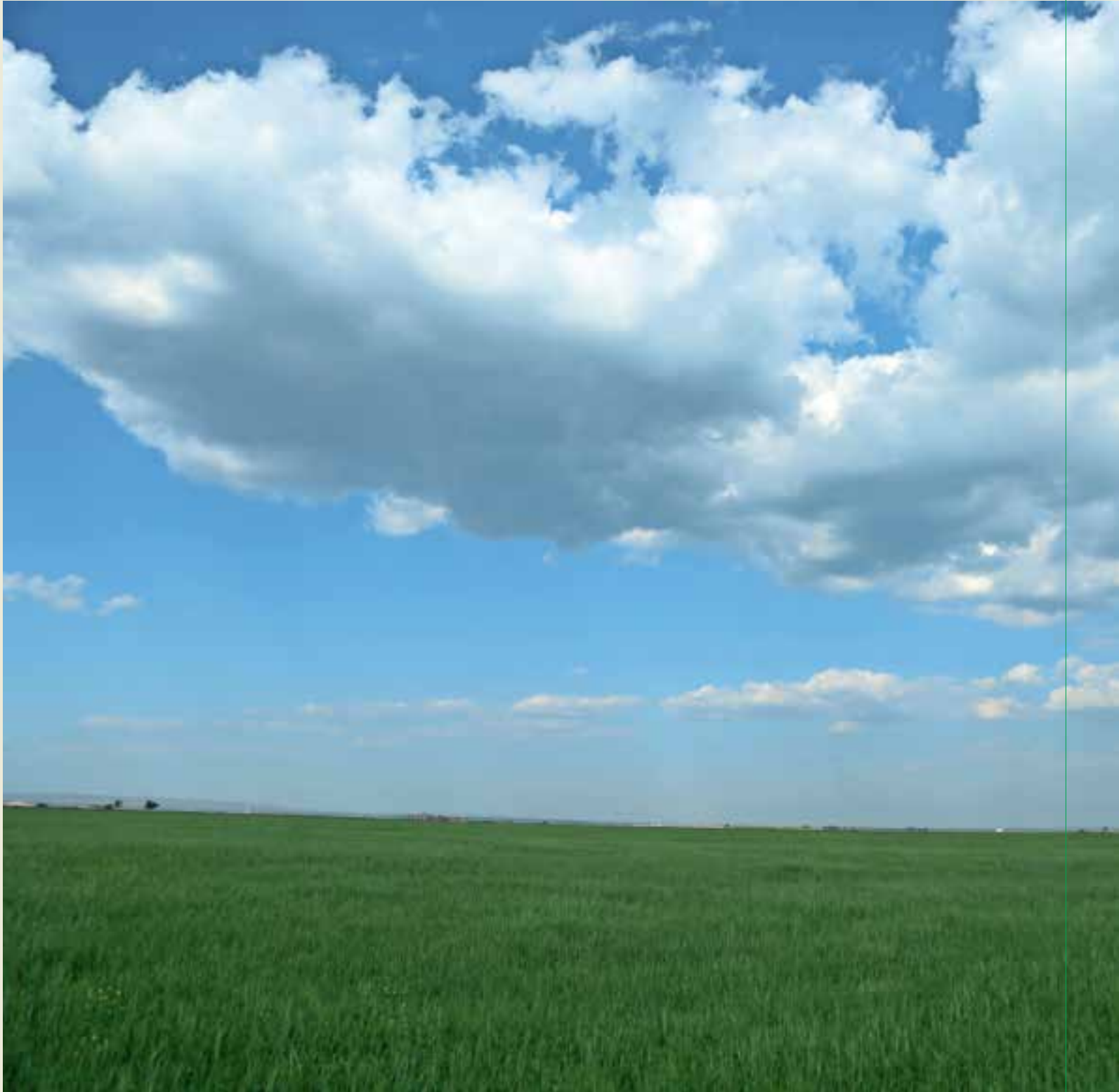
Only wanting a simpler life



When I first arrived at the camp:
April 2018. I go back to this picture
whenever I need a sense of clarity. A
Bedouin family chose to live in this
tent house long before the war. They
were neither displaced nor were their
homes destroyed. A simple home for a
simple happy family. How I wish this
for myself.



Green lands and colorful skies





ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ————— AL-BAL CAMP
————— SPRING 2018 —————

The farther north you go, the more vast is the land. This is how I felt in this infinite green space. “How did they manage to liberate all this land from the regime?” I ask myself before Douma comes back to mind, where there were bombs and smoke in every horizon.

Each day, a new and different sun



ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ——— ROAD TO RAJO
SUMMER 2018 ——— RAMADAN

I knew we were in Ramadan,
but time stood still on this road just
before sunset...It seems I have missed
the time to break my fast again.



No broken windows, no fear in the horizon

ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE — K FAR AL-JANNAH

— SPRING 2018 —



After leaving the camp, I went on my first visit to this peaceful village. It is called Mahabba meaning ‘benevolence.’ You feel that the war had not passed by here, nor left any of its traces behind whether on its people or on their homes. There were no broken windows and no fear in the horizon.

DOUMA ————— FROM THE GREAT MOSQUE
————— WINTER 2015 —————



Looking over Douma. Behind these destroyed buildings is Adra central prison, and to the left of the city is the very mountain from which we are being bombed. Fear surrounds our horizon in every direction.

Such is Douma, a zone of death



DOUMA ————— BEHIND THE MUNICIPALITY
————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————



The “New Douma” district was the most beautiful area in the city and the most expensive also, property prices were relatively high there. After the war we began calling it the “zone of death” due to its proximity to where the regime’s army was based. New Douma is now completely destroyed.

Not much, but a safe space

Under this rubble here, is my studio, where I lived and worked. This humble place of mine was a gathering spot for many of my friends, and for our memories too. Saeed, Milad, Muhammad and myself turned it into a recording studio, but they all left before I did. After the building fell in the last attack on April 6th, 2018, I tried to search through the rubble for my belongings, my clothes, my guitar and my equipment, my pictures with my father and my brother... I could not find any of them. All my memories lay there still, buried with all the books of Saeed and Milad.

DOUMA ————— AL-CORNICHE
————— SPRING 2018 —————





DOUMA ————— AL-CORNICHE
————— SUMMER 2016 —————

This is how my studio looked on the inside two years ago, it's nice ... right? And that's me in the red shirt. I would go there to escape the war outside, but it was no escape. It was a one-story studio, and so if the regime shelled it, we would be killed instantaneously.



Choosing life every time



———— IDLIB COUNTRYSIDE ————
SUMMER 2018 ———— EID AL FITR

Eid holidays were as festive as they're meant to be. Abu Ghassan sets up the Eid tent every year and insists on practicing this ritual even if he was the last man standing. The people here make the act of insistence on life seem as if it is an easy thing to do.





Squinting when in sunlight

———— IDLIB COUNTRYSIDE ————
SUMMER 2018 ———— EID AL FITR

Children who left Ghouta were deprived of playing there, and are now in Idlib playing here.



Some children were not fortunate enough to leave Ghouta. Sarah and her little sister squint their eyes at the site of sunlight after weeks of having to hide underground... Four days after I had taken this picture, the sisters died during airstrikes.

DOUMA ————— IN FRONT OF A SHELTER
————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————



Moving underground





DOUMA ——— UNDERGROUND
————— WINTER 2017 ———



Underground, there's a center for an organization that cares for orphaned children ...“We play football even underground.”

Young amputees' dreams centered around their ability to use prosthetic limbs that would help them take care of themselves without relying on the help of anybody else. This underground center is simple and cannot absorb the sheer number of casualties.

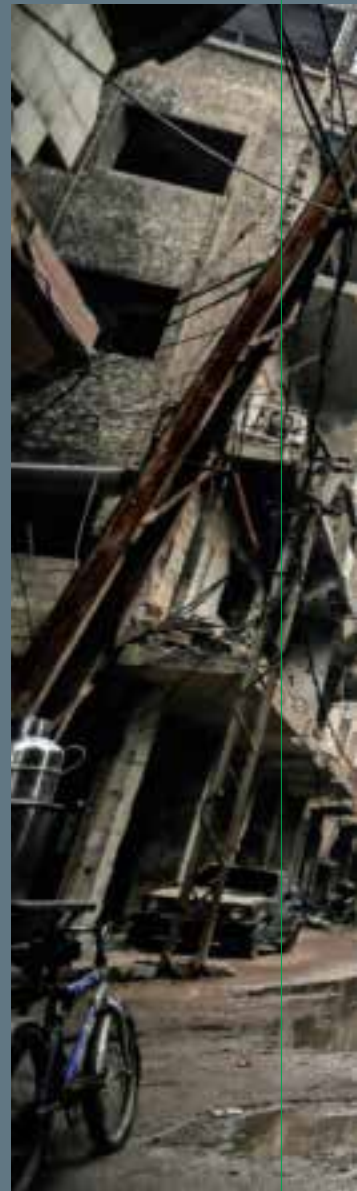


We rejoice when it rains

DOUMA ————— KHOURSHIED STREET
————— WINTER 2017 —————

Sometimes the skies would be kind to us; clouds would linger on top of Douma providing cover for us from hovering warplanes, and so bombardments would cease. God had imposed an air embargo on the regime.

This is my older brother. He's always afraid. Usually, I would leave him behind at home to read in his books while I rush out to document. How I wish that rain be the main event for Ghouta today.





No light at the end of that road



DOUMA ————— AL-CORNICHE STREET
————— SUMMER 2015 —————



It is 10 pm. I am standing on a bridge facing an area controlled by the regime. A sniper has taken a position at the end of that road. He would kill me if he saw me...“What pictures are you taking? Give me the camera and come with me!” an armed person approached me shouting. “You traitor! Are you taking photos of Jaish al-Islam bases to give to the regime?” he continued.

The argument with the gunman lasted for half an hour before he let me be, provided that I do not come back with my camera again. Time cannot be darker, the regime, its unruly shabiha militias and its prisons at one end of the road and Jaish al-Islam, its unruly shabiha and its prisons at the other end. The light in this image is that of a motorbike that made a quick turn in the middle of that road in order to avoid being hit by sniper fire.

I then decided not to go out and take photos at night on my own, and so I would always accompany a friend with me. This time we went up the minaret of the Great Mosque, the highest point in Douma.

220.0 x 300.0 mm



DOUMA — FROM THE GREAT MOSQUE
— SUMMER 2015 —



Death, at any given moment

My friend Mehran, father to a little girl called Bissan, dreamt that one day, he and his family would live without war. He was always worried when we went out to take pictures. He would call home to speak to Bissan although she couldn't speak. I would usually stand under his house, call out to him, and he would look out holding Bissan in his arms...That day, I logged into Telegram following the strikes and in the forefront was a picture of Mehran and news of his death. In war, we expected death at any given moment, whether our own or our friend's. It was no longer shocking.

Nonetheless, I still passed by his home, and called out to him from under his window, "Mehran... I'm going out to take photos"... I knew he won't answer. But I will tell Bissan one day how you left, leaving me behind to go out on my own at night to take photos.



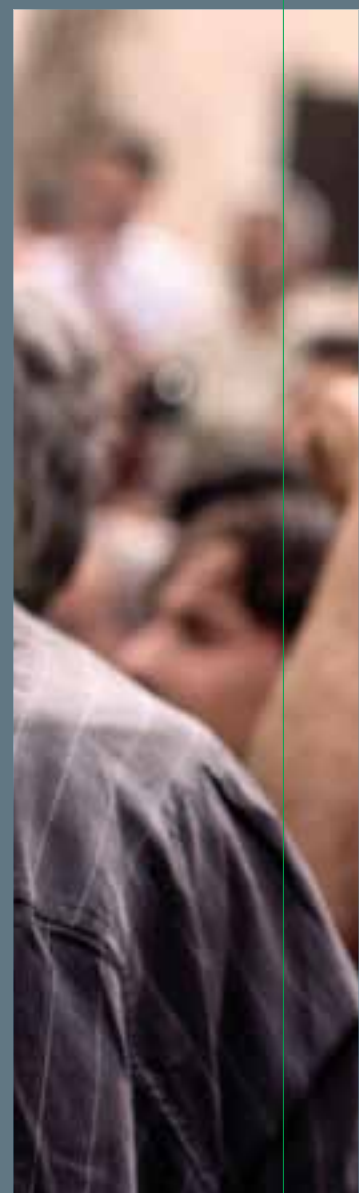


Brothers who want to kill each other



DOUMA ————— MISRABA
————— SUMMER 2016 —————

Fighting between Jaish al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman, two opposing armed factions who controlled Eastern Ghouta, resulted in the death of almost 700 persons from the two factions along with many civilians who were caught in between. Residents, as a result, took the streets in protest, demanding that the two groups stop the bloodshed. This father weeps for his two sons, the first a member of Faylaq al-Rahman, the second of Jaish al-Islam, and the two wanted to kill one another. “Your sons look like our country, old man.”





A picture I did not want



GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— THE GREAT MOSQUE

————— WINTER 2015 —————



A picture I would rather have not taken? Yes ... Mahmoud's.

We met by chance. I used to walk through the streets of Douma carrying my camera. He asked me to take a picture of him so he could upload it to his Facebook account, and to send it to his mother as well because she lived outside Syria. I suggested we go to the big mosque in Douma and asked him to stand outside while I go inside to take his picture from the window.

He stood still and looked into the camera while I adjusted the lens and then I felt the sky falling. The sound of the blast deafened me. I could not see, the smoke and the dust filled the air. I asked of my body to move, but it couldn't. The shock was heavier than all that had fallen on me. I gathered my strength to stand up to look for Mahmoud. But how will Mahmoud hear me calling out to him among the hundreds of voices calling out for help from under the rubble?

The dust cleared a little, I saw him. He was a few meters away from where I had asked him to stand, but it seems he had left his torn body before I found him. Am I responsible for his death? Why did I bring him here? I could have taken his picture on any hill made out of rubble, it would not have mattered to his mother where he was standing, the main thing being she could see the shining life in his eyes. The White Helmets carried Mahmood's body ... it was the most painful picture I have ever taken in my whole life.

If only the pilot had taken off a few minutes later. If only his daughter maybe had been sick that day. Then I could have taken Mahmud's picture before her father dropped a bomb on the Great Mosque. A photo had been Mahmud's last wish. A photo!

I'm not okay, I try to live, I try to love ... Like any young man would but I'm not okay, I have lost a lot of things I love ...

Pause for a moment

GHOUTA, DOUMA — NEAR AL-MALAAB AREA
WINTER 2017/2018



On the rooftop of a six-story building, before going down to the basement. I thought: "If the regime was able to do it, it would set the sky ablaze." In the shelter: "Abu Omar, hurry! Your cousin and nephews have been killed in the attack." But Abu Omar does not move. We recognize each other's death in the morning, we greet the living who have survived in the evening, and we become silent for the dead. We just go silent!



GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— HALAB STREET
————— WINTER 2016 —————

Today, warplanes carried out massive airstrikes on Douma. The rubble blocked the roads for the White Helmets. Regime aircraft were spotting the city's streets aiming fire at anything they saw moving. Yet we get out from under the rubble and continue walking towards life.

Move through the rubble

GHOUTA, DOUMA ——— OVERLOOKING FROM AL-CORNICHE

————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————



Sitting on my balcony with my friends, we look over to see my neighbor, Abu Salah's destroyed building. He lived next to this park where we used to sit and drink coffee while kids played. He went out to get bread and yogurt and returned to find his building flattened and his family under the rubble. I couldn't handle hearing him scream for his children, name by name, Salah, Souad and Maya as he tries to remove the debris with his bare hands. I left the neighborhood running with no destination in mind.

Only Salah survived. "I went into the kitchen to prepare a bite to eat," he recounted, "I was too hungry to wait for my father to come back home. I don't remember what happened, I only remember a strong red light, and then I fell unconscious. Then I woke up to find myself under the rubble. I screamed out for my mom, but she would not respond. I saw some light through the cracks, and so I followed it, and I crawled until I was able to get out."

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— TAYSEER TAHA STREET
————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————

Ammar and his friend go out every morning to remove the rubble. They demolish our homes and besiege us...and we, clean up their mess...We keep ourselves hopeful every day.



We make swings of rockets

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— AL-CORNICHE
————— WINTER 2016 —————

This bomb fell close to a school causing terror among children...and so they made toys out of it.



Abu Ali makes toys for his children out of the bombs that fell but did not explode. Most of Douma's residents take the rockets that have landed to empty them and turn them into swings for children to play with.

Ali, 10, in blue - Mahmoud, 12, in red. How can you accuse them of being terrorists those who make swings out of your bombs?!

GHOUTA, DOUMA — AL-CORNICHE AREA

— WINTER 2017 —



Nothing will help us forget





“With every passing hour, they ask me about her, so I bring them here to the lake hoping that fishing would get their mind off her. It's been three years now that my wife has been detained by the regime, and still, I do not know why she was arrested at the checkpoint. Until this day, I have no news about her.” And so, Abu Omar told me his story after he had welcomed my request to take some pictures of him and his boys. No house in Syria is without a member who has either been displaced, detained or gone missing. And nothing will help you forget your mother's detainment at a checkpoint by Syrian regime forces.



Document, for history's sake



ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE ————— MIDANKI LAKE

————— SUMMER 2018 —————



As I sat on the edge of the lake, I went over all the photos I have taken in my mind. Though I have no money to give, nor can I ensure the release of but a single detainee, I feel an immense amount of responsibility towards my people...For I have my lens, and my ability to document moments of their lives for history's sake and so that those who come after us will know what really happened to us.

Observing the observers

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— AL-JALAA STREET

————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————



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The cessation of bombardments that accompanied UN delegation visit to Ghouta was an opportunity for Abu Mahmud to look for his brother and children amid the rubble of his house, following the offensive on Douma. All the large bulldozers were bombed, and so the White Helmets were forced to dig the debris with hand tools until they found Mahmoud's body in pieces. A UN car stopped. One of them got out and quickly returned to the car. He wasn't affected by the father's tears nor the destruction around the body as much as he was disturbed by the smell of death. First, countries doubt the massacres we are subjected to, and then their delegates flee at the very first test. Decision-makers care only about other decision-makers, who only see us as numbers that smell unpleasant when they die.

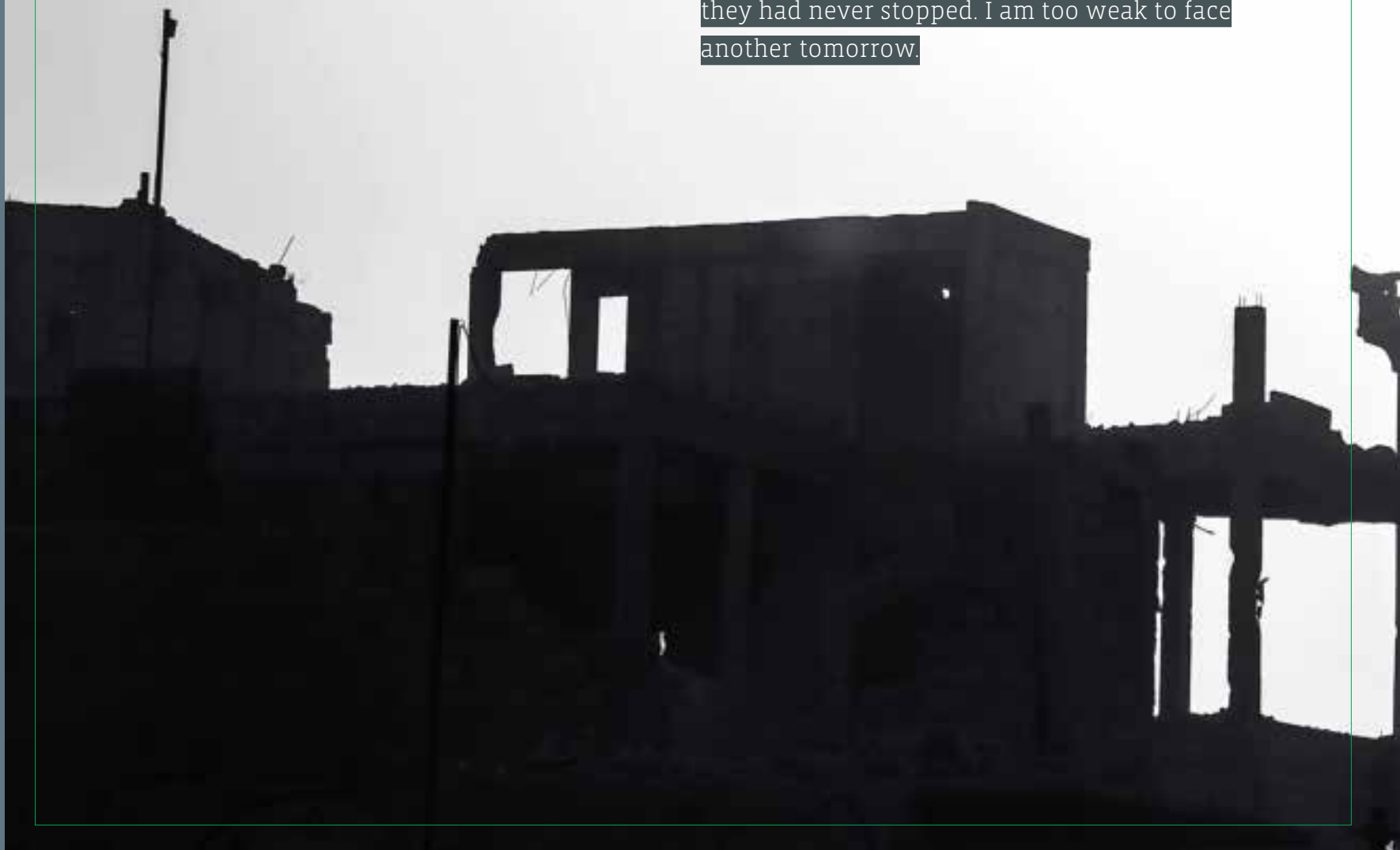


Wishing the sun would not set

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— AL-JALAA STREET

————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————

I do not want this day to end. Today, the United Nations delegation will leave at sunset... and tomorrow, the bombings will return as if they had never stopped. I am too weak to face another tomorrow.





Little do they care

GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— AL-MASKAN

————— WINTER 2017/2018 —————

Following the UN delegation visit to Douma and in light of all the international talks about lifting the siege, the result was that out of the 230 people believed to be at risk if they did not receive the necessary treatment, only 30 people were evacuated by the Red Crescent.

The Red Crescent volunteers who are from Damascus do not know what is happening in Ghouta, one of them did not dare to step out of the ambulance even. In Damascus people do not understand what is going on in their countryside... or perhaps some of them do not want to know.





Systematically targeting schools



Even the schools in Ghouta were considered military targets. The schools of Fatima al-Zahraa and Hassan al-Basri were targeted by the regime. Children were killed in both schools and others were wounded before we turned our shelters into permanent schools with no playgrounds. We moved underground to take refuge from the planes, and there we stayed to be taught. That is how we were in Ghouta.



GHOUTA, DOUMA — KHOURSHIED STREET, HASSAN BASRI
— WINTER 2016 —



The old school bus

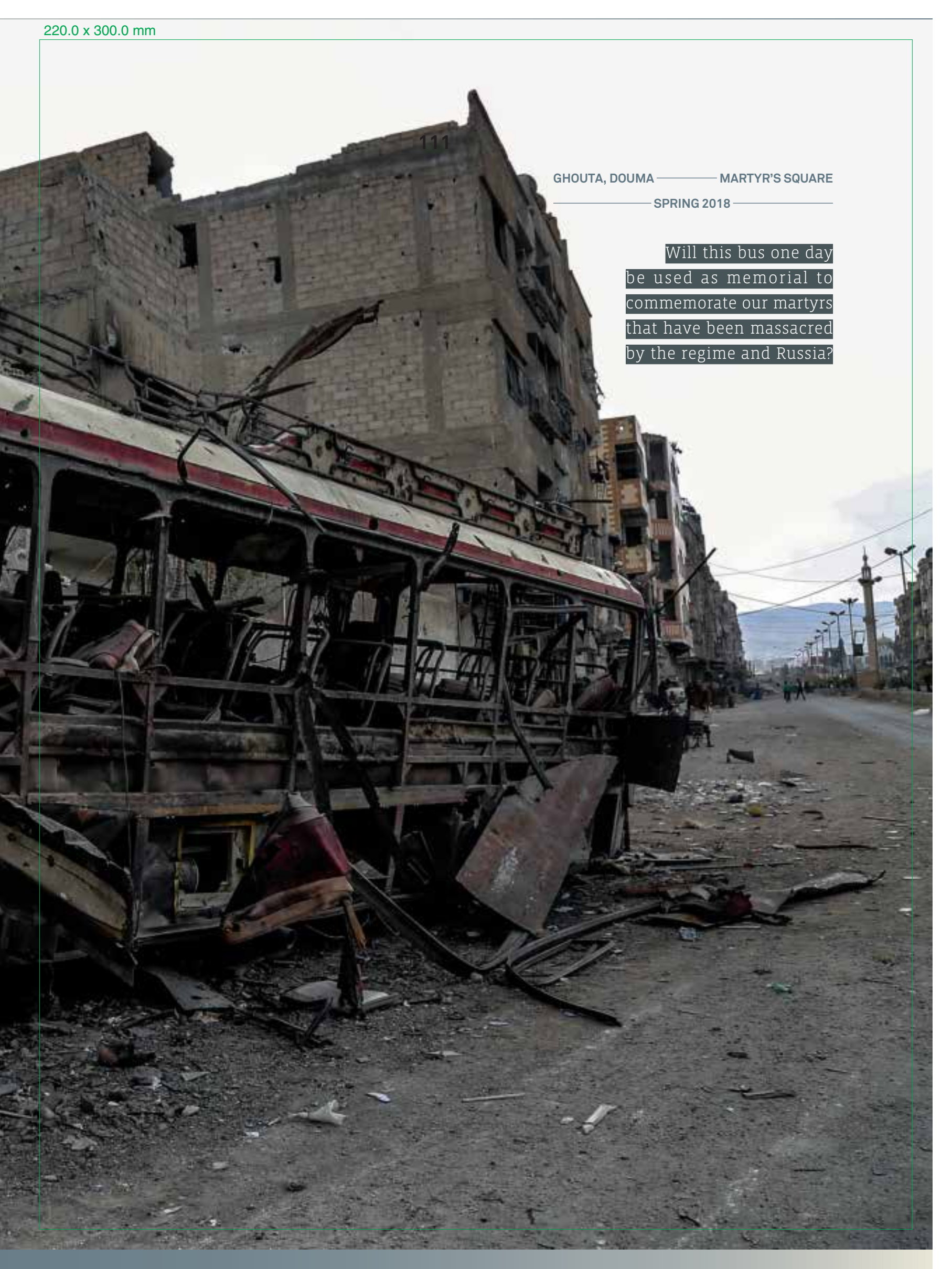


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GHOUTA, DOUMA ————— MARTYR'S SQUARE

————— SPRING 2018 —————

Will this bus one day
be used as memorial to
commemorate our martyrs
that have been massacred
by the regime and Russia?



Some lessons learned



The schools of Idlib, too, have suffered from the bombings of the regime, but they didn't go underground, they stayed on the ground where schools usually are. Regime bombs fall on the area once or more a week, but the bombings here are relatively kinder than they were in Ghouta. The civilians here have nothing to do with the extremist factions. They still seek a normal life outside the burden of war. By civilians here I mean two to three million civilians in need of humanitarian and financial support.



Somewhat free

One of my friends opened a cafe in Aleppo's countryside. The simple act of going to a cafe had been one of the activities were deprived of during the siege, and so, you see many young people from Ghouta come to practice this simple activity that they have been denied of for so long. Smoking the Shisha would result in imprisonment by Jaish al-Islam's security office, for it is allegedly sinful. Listening to music on loudspeakers on the street too, was considered sinful! Even cigarettes were banned for a period of time. Civilians were dying of hunger, and Jaish al-Islam was cracking down on those who were smoking cigarettes!

ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE, AFRIN ——— FOUR SEASONS CAFE
SUMMER 2018 ————— RAMADAN



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It's as if Ghouta was a big prison cell. Today we feel that we are, somewhat, free.

Olive groves and branches

ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE — AL-MAHABA VILLAGE

SUMMER 2018



To reach his fields, Abu Shaker needs to pass over an area that has not yet been cleared of the landmines planted by the PKK. I asked him of the bravery he holds in him, and so he reminded me of the barrel bombs and rockets they had grown accustomed to in Ghouta...That is what we got used to during the siege had taught us, death will always come as a surprise whether you expect it or not...so why have fear?



EmAli visited her olive fields for the first time after leaving for Idlib when the regime attacked her village. Olive picking is the only constant in her life. She promises to tend the fields every time she has the chance to.



Like the trees, she will stay



Em Mohammad loved her home and refused to leave it even as her city was being bombed to the ground, for it reminds her of her son who died during the war. She goes down to the fields with her grandson to collect wood for the winter.



IDLIB COUNTRYSIDE ————— FALL 2018



Homesick to death



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This coffee is for us. Myself, Khalil, Bahaa and Mahmoud.

"How is Bahaa?" his mother startled me with the question. I had called her in hopes that she tells me that Bahaa and Mahmoud had safely reached Ghouta again. We were searching for them when someone said to us that they were last seen at a checkpoint for the regime in the south of the area. A trafficker was taking them back to their mother who was forcibly left behind. They never reached Ghouta... they didn't return to Idlib.



AFRIN COUNTRYSIDE — AL-MAHABA VILLAGE

SUMMER 2018

We can still dance

Mohammad from Douma. A former detainee of the regime, he lost his father and three brothers in war, shortly after that his mother had passed away, and so he decided to join us in the convoys of displacement to Northern Syria. He was lonely.

Once he arrived he decided that he must get married, with his aunt by his side as his “representer” he headed to the camps populated by the citizens of Ghouta, he found the “appropriate” girl and within weeks, they were married. This is the wedding his friends organized for him. The people in Syria are still able to dance.

ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE — AL-MAHABA VILLAGE

————— SUMMER 2018 —————





Listen to music, and smile to the camera



Being that no one took pictures of Raed's wedding, I asked him to put on his wedding suit and join me on tour around the city where I took pictures of him amongst the destroyed houses...
“May your house flourish in your presence!”



In Ghouta, we would play music in secrecy. My brother and his friend Kamal would spend hours playing music though it was an act banned by Jaish al Islam... A Bedouin saying says, “Stay where music is, for the evil do not sing.”

Wishing you safety and peace

GHOUTA, DOUMA — WINTER 2017/2018

One of the military attacks on Ghouta coincided with a military strike on the city of Saraqeb in the countryside of Idlib, and I have friends there...so I told them in secrecy: "Salamtek Saraqeb" Wishing you safety and peace, Saraqeb.





PDF- Acceptance

