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A Two-Year Travelogue from Hell

By Christoph Reuter

1/4/2013

Since unrest began in Syria in the spring of 2011, reporting from the country has been difficult. Former contacts are now dead or can't be located, and the country lies in ruins. Now, amid harrowing conditions, the balance of power appears to have shifted, with rebels beginning to gain the upper hand.

Night falls quickly in Syria, as the overloaded pickup trucks carrying stray refugee families emerge through the mist. The headlight beams from our car fall over destroyed houses on our drive through olive groves and abandoned towns. Campfires can occasionally be seen in the distance.

We've driven along this road once before, in April 2012, which these days seems like an eternity ago. At the time, there was still electricity here, and people still lived in Taftanas, Sarmin, Kurin and other villages in Idlib Province, in northern Syria. But now, in December 2012, entire villages are empty and pockmarked with bullet holes, their residents having fled from airstrikes, hunger and frigid temperatures.

After a while, we reach a village where residents did not openly demonstrate against Syrian dictator Bashar Assad in the past. As a result, they still have electricity today. A man opens a door, shivering as he looks out at the damp, cold landscape. "Thank God for this weather!" he says wryly. It's been raining for days, and everything seems immersed in fog and mud. But the

fog is also a deterrent against aircraft and helicopters, sparing the area the usual bombardment for a few days and providing a moment of calm in the midst of the apocalypse.

Today, Syria is a devastated country. The cities have turned into battlefields, and in the places from which the Assad regime's troops and militias were forced to withdraw, its air force is now incinerating the infrastructure.

Nevertheless, after months of static conflict between unequally matched forces, during which provinces were neither lost by the regime nor gained by the rebels, the balance has suddenly shifted. Military camps, airports and cities are falling to the rebels, while demoralized and hungry Syrian army units are simply giving up. The rebels are already on the eastern outskirts of Damascus, the capital. The army is defending its last bastions in the north and east, like islands in a sea, only able to receive supplies from the air. Even the Russian government, Assad's most important ally next to Iran, is gradually abandoning the dictator. Before Christmas, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he wasn't concerned with the fate of the Assad regime.

Anxiety about Postwar Syria

"We are tired," says one of the rebels who have gathered in the village on this evening. The group includes a man charged with distributing bread, a few fighters and the owner of the only satellite telephone in the village. Everyone here has lost friends and relatives, in a country that is sinking all around them.

"The others, the soldiers, are also tired. But at least we know what we're fighting for," the rebel says. Even though they are sometimes worried about the future, about the days after victory when revenge will be taken, another adds: "Who can blame someone whose family was killed?"

But where would that leave a revolution that was intended to bring down the dictator, but not plunge the country into a civil war? The Assad regime will fall, but no one knows what will happen after that.

The West has a bizarre impression of the Syrian revolution, fueled by the multiplicity of reports, photos and videos from a war zone. But who exactly are these Syrians, of whom initially a few, and then hundreds of thousands, began protesting in the spring of 2011 and eventually took up arms against the regime? What is really happening in the country where -- depending on one's interpretation of events -- either al-Qaida groups have long infiltrated the insurgency or the CIA is merely staging everything to bring about "regime change?"

At least 2 million Syrians are currently refugees within their own country, and more than 500,000 have fled to neighboring countries. This week, the United Nations reported that it estimates more than 60,000 people have been killed in the uprising.

Two Years of Change

Since the beginning of the revolution, we -- a photographer, a Syrian colleague and I -- have traveled around the country a number of times, mostly following secret routes, passed on from

one local opposition group to the next. We have been in hiding and have worn disguises, and we have been shot at and chased. It isn't easy to cope with the fact that so many of the people who helped us are now dead.

The current trip, shortly before Christmas, is our eighth since the beginning of the revolution. It passes through the north and to Deir el-Zour, a center for the petroleum industry on the Euphrates River, deep in the country's eastern desert. On our earlier trips, we passed through more than two-thirds of the populated parts of Syria, often spending weeks traveling in Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Idlib and countless other cities, towns and villages.

We witnessed the beginning of the peaceful demonstrations, the inferno and the strange periods of calm in between.

At the beginning, in 2011, I traveled to the country three times on an official visa, allegedly as an agricultural adviser, an alibi so absurd that it was above suspicion. At the government forces' checkpoints, it helped to identify myself as a devout Christian -- not because all Christians support Assad, but because the regime would like to have their support. In 2011, we were still able to move back and forth between the two sides. But, by 2012, we could only travel in areas no longer controlled by Assad's troops. Unfortunately, this limited our field of vision.

On the other hand, the rebel-controlled area is large and uneven enough to avoid affiliation with individual groups. Moreover, we made a concerted effort to report only what we had experienced firsthand.

This is also a story of loose ends. The people with whom it begins, in the summer of 2011, are almost all dead or missing. Some have taken their place, and some of those are now dead, too. Others have become hardened and obsessed with revenge. Still others have transformed themselves: Interior decorators have become guerilla commanders and electricians are now mayors. They are doing things they have never learned how to do, building a new system even before the old one has been overthrown.

Early Days Full of Uncertainty

In 2011, there was a tension in the air, but no one in Damascus could imagine what would happen later on. Some of the friends I made in 1989, when I spent a year studying at the university in Damascus, made their careers in business. None of them seriously believed that the country would see any major changes.

But then, in the spring of 2011, shaky YouTube videos taken in Daraa in the south and Idlib in the north emerged. Eventually the news broke that hundreds of thousands had protested in Hama, where in 1982, Hafez Assad, the father of the current president and founder of the Assad dynasty, had brutally crushed an insurrection and had his troops destroy half of the city center.

At first, there was news of events happening in more distant parts of the country, only two or three hours' drive away, and yet somehow incomprehensible in the calm of Damascus. "We're having a revolution! I saw it on TV," I was told by an old friend in Damascus, who has

expensive art on his walls and cases of Remy Martin cognac in his cabinet -- a brilliant cynic whose father, a member of the opposition, had fled the country years earlier and died in exile. In 2011, the son faced the same dilemma as many others: No one believed in the regime, and yet no one could imagine its fall.

Despite the external calm, fear was everywhere. Who could one trust? We were still allowed to make telephone calls as we pleased, and yet we couldn't speak openly on the phone. Later on, the situation would be reversed when everyone was talking, but the networks were increasingly breaking down. It was also still possible to drive around the country, but one had to make extraordinary efforts to meet with opposition members from other cities.

Finally, we learned that a Dutch Jesuit priest who had lived in Syria for 35 years was traveling from Damascus to Homs. He offered to take us with him to his monastery's rural estate, where it pressed wine and where he would be leading a weekend retreat.

Traveling with a priest on a public bus was above suspicion in Assad's realm. We tried to explain to an activist in Homs, who wanted to take us with him to the nightly demonstrations, where to pick us up the next morning. But he didn't understand why he was supposed to meet us at a Jesuit winery and didn't show up, perhaps because he thought it was a trap.

This meant that we were obliged to attend Father Frans' workshop. There was shooting in Homs, and we had to meditate for two days. There were drones circling in the sky above us, and we did yoga.

We didn't even know which side our host was on. Sometimes he referred to the protests as justified, and sometimes he called the rebels terrorists, leaving us puzzled. But we were anxious not to cause trouble for him or ourselves. It was like that everywhere in the first few months, a time when people said little of what was on their minds because they were still under the spell of the old fear that had held the country in its grip for 41 years.

Abandoned by the World

A few days later, we made our first attempt to reach Homs. We bought our tickets at the bus terminal, but they had to be stamped at a counter staffed by employees of the intelligence apparatus before we were allowed to board the bus.

"To Homs?" The woman at the counter stared at us silently for a long moment before writing "Aleppo" on our tickets. Aleppo, firmly in government hands, was still above suspicion at the time. If Aleppo were stamped on our tickets, no one would ask questions, and the long-distance bus to Aleppo stopped in Homs. It was a small gesture of subversion.

Homs, a dull industrial city in central Syria, would mark the turning point. In August 2011, we joined demonstrators who knew that security forces could open fire on them at any time.

There were still protests in the winter of 2011, but only in places out of range of the regime's snipers. The manhunt began in the afternoon, when they would shoot at anyone who tried to

reach the other side. That winter, for the first time, we heard the question that consisted of only one word and affected everyone. It was shouted at us by a veiled woman on the street: "Ouen?" or "Where?"

Where, the Syrians wanted to know, were the Americans, the Europeans, their Arab brothers, the rest of the world? Why was everyone just watching?

After a funeral at a village cemetery, an old man stood in the winter wind as he laconically -- and accurately -- predicted what was going to happen. "It won't stop," he said. "Bashar will kill as many people as the world allows."

I wonder what happened to the old man. The neighborhoods we visited in the winter of 2011 are now in ruins, and the army has sealed off Homs. Those with whom we walked across the wintry fields, squeezing into entranceways and ducking to avoid snipers, are gone. There is a farewell photo, taken in Homs in January 2012, of SPIEGEL photographer Marcel Mittensiefen and three members of the local "media committee" who helped us. All three are dead.

Change Comes Slowly in the Villages

Omar Astalavista was the pseudonym used by the engineering student who accompanied us in the Homs neighborhood of Khalidiya in August, December and February. He established contacts and made sure we had food and places to sleep. Every few days, he would go back to the other side, the official side, to finish his final exams at the university. "It's crazy, I know, but I'm not going to let them destroy my degree," he said.

When he said goodbye to Marcel at dawn on Feb. 4, he told him: "I hope I can give you my real name next time." He was dead a few hours later. He was trying to film the recovery of victims from a mortar attack when another mortar struck. His real name was Mazhar Tayyara.

Abu Yassir and Abu Mohammed, the other two men in the photo, fled from Homs a few weeks later, with plans to go underground in Damascus. They were shot to death there during a raid in March.

Father Frans, the inscrutable Jesuit who, in the previous summer, had avoided aligning himself with either side, stayed in the monastery in the old section of Homs. About 50 Christian and Muslim families, who either couldn't or wouldn't flee, reportedly took refuge in the monastery.

The key shift in the Syrian balance of power didn't take place in the cities, but in thousands of villages in the countryside. Assad's army was massive and mobile. But it couldn't be everywhere. People weren't as afraid in the villages as they were in the cities because everyone knew everyone else. Slowly but steadily, people in the villages began to change sides.

Assad's troops couldn't prevent every village from joining the rebels. But, in early 2012, it could still punish every village for doing so. When we drove through Idlib in April, we followed in the tracks of the 76th Armored Brigade.

Fighting Fear with Laughter

The brigade barreled through the countryside like a medieval army with modern weaponry, attacking village after village with helicopters and tanks. Soldiers and hired militias looted the houses and then burned them down. People were tortured and shot to death, as were cattle, sheep and even pigeons. After a few hours, or sometimes as much as a day and a half, the marauding troops would disappear again, but not without leaving their calling card behind on building walls: "Liwa al-Maut," or "Brigade of Death," the name they had given their outfit.

We followed their trail through eight villages, where we saw fresh mass graves, putrid piles of dead animals and schools and mosques with meter-wide holes where tank shells had struck. We gazed at the blackened ruins of buildings and saw the graffiti on the walls, with the same words appearing again and again: "Assad forever! Or we'll burn the country down!"

All the survivors could do was flee, and many did. But others stayed behind. "We're farmers," said Khalid Abdul Kadir from Bashiriya. "What else are we supposed to live on? The cherries and apricots will be ripe soon."

Wreckage can be cleared away and people can overcome their grief, but what can they do against fear?

"Sarcasm," said Aziz Adjini, who taught English at the University of Idlib before returning to his village, Kurin. Laughter helps against the horrors, he said, "because the most important thing is for us to conquer our eternal fear." With his moustache and habit of rolling his eyes, Adjini, who was in his mid-40s, resembled Groucho Marx. He came up with the slogans used at the Friday demonstrations in Kurin, such as: "Bashar wants residents to withdraw from their cities to protect the tanks that are there."

Adjini believed in the power of reason and refused to shoot. But his cousin, Mahmoud Adjini, was a lieutenant in an armored infantry division before defecting to join the Free Syrian Army (FSA), for whom he trained a small village militia. "If we ever have tanks," he said, "I'll be able to handle them."

Another cousin, Mohammed Adjini, the local school director, was once an enthusiastic supporter of the regime. But when everything gets confusing, where does that support go? He decided to ignore the fact that one institution of the regime fired on his school with tanks while classes were in session, and that the only reason no one died was that students were able to escape just minutes before.

Afterwards Adjini was on the phone with another regime institution, the school authority, negotiating over which forms were needed to request new teaching supplies to replace those that had been incinerated in the attack.

Destruction over Surrender

Together, the three Adjini cousins formed an image of conditions in the north. For the moment, Aziz seemed to be right. In Bashiriya, a village that was especially hard hit, men sat in the shade of a damaged building and, like Aziz, cracked bitter jokes about regime propaganda. "Why did the army shoot the cows?" Answer: "Because they were paid by people abroad." The men smiled. Then another man said: "Look at the sheep, with their dishevelled wool. It's obvious that they're Islamists!" The men snickered. "It's obvious that the pigeons worked as couriers for the Mossad!" said a third man, referring to Israel's foreign intelligence service. And they laughed again, trying to overcome their fear.

It was the calm between the storms. Around the same time, on the morning of April 10, all of the residents of the town of Maraa, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) to the northeast, had fled from the approaching army. They had received advance warning that they had one night to wall in the minarets at the mosques to prevent snipers from taking up positions there, as they had done elsewhere. Then they fled into the olive groves or to nearby Turkey.

When they returned, Yassir al-Hajji, the owner of a café, discovered that his refrigerator had been blown open with hand grenades and that his desk was perforated with bullets from a machine gun. He had emigrated 30 years ago and had an American passport, had worked in Maraa as a football coach and, most recently, had owned an antique shop in Athens, but returned in early 2011 when the first protests began. His dream was to represent Maraa in parliament one day. "That was our chance, we thought. We knew it would be tough," he said. "But so what?" He also found the omnipresent words written by the regime troops, which he photographed before they were whitewashed: "Assad forever! Or we'll burn the country down!"

Even for a dictator, it's unusual to threaten subjects with destruction of the entire country. Not even former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein or his Libyan counterpart, Moammar Gadhafi, did that. It reveals the strange relationship the Assads have with their country. When Bashar's father Hafez Assad sent his brother Rifaat to Saudi Arabia after the 1982 Hama massacre, the Saudi king refused to see him. Rifaat sent the king his regards, coupled with an ominous threat: "If we ever get threatened again, we will be willing not only to wipe out Hama but also Damascus."

Despite the determination with which the Assads have retained their grip on the country for the last four decades, they seem disconnected from those they govern. They have treated Syria like loot to be held onto, to be destroyed rather than surrendered. Nothing can be taken for granted when it comes to the power of Assad and his Alawite minority. On the contrary, before the senior Assad came into power in the wake of a military coup, the Alawites, about 10 percent of the population, were the poorest people in the country, only coming to Damascus as servants. But then Hafez Assad, after rising through the ranks of the military, finally came to power in another coup, in 1970. His son is now determined to hold on to that power at all costs -- or else, as his soldiers' slogan goes, "we will burn the country down!"

Searching for Bearings

A confused calm prevailed in the villages in the early summer of 2012, as tank brigades devastated the cities where residents had rebelled: Homs, Rastan, Deir el-Zour, the northern suburbs of Damascus.

Yassir al-Hajji was caught between entirely personal fronts. He was the civilian leader of the uprising in Maraa. Aleppo, the large city in northern Syria, was still completely in the hands of the regime. Hajji's 14-year-old daughter still had final examinations to complete at the high school there, and she was determined to do so.

Every morning for almost a week, we anxiously looked on as his daughter traveled to Aleppo on back roads, accompanied by an aunt who would wait outside the school so that she could warn the girl if intelligence agents came to the school to arrest her. But nothing happened. The fighting in Aleppo started six weeks later.

Outside the small towns, Syria in the summer of 2012 felt like being transported back to the Middle Ages. No one knew what the situation was like behind the next row of hills. Our perceptions instinctively changed with the paths that we took. We went from village to village on tiny roads and paths, or across dusty fields, through tributary valleys and olive groves. We avoided cities and major roads.

Every trip across the horizon became an expedition, one that we mapped out with pebbles in the sand and detailed maps we had drawn. Where were the army guards posted? From which hills did their snipers have a view of which areas? Was the wireless network working? If not, did anyone have radios? And, most importantly, who was going to drive in front?

Despite the planning, there was little about these trips that could in fact be planned. As a result, there was no better way to see what was happening in the country than to take these trips, during which we were often stranded, listening to life stories, explanations of why a soldier had changed sides or how a bus driver had become a fighter.

We accompanied the wounded, deserters and refugees, and we sometimes ended up in the middle of battlefield discussions and even FSA arms deals. In December, we accidentally ran into one of the biggest arms traffickers in Idlib, who openly named the source of his supplies. "The regime army," he said. "The officers sell us whatever we can pay for. They know things are coming to an end, and they want to make some money first. They don't care if we use the weapons to shoot at their own soldiers. The system was always corrupt."

Friends or Foes?

We also experienced the chaos of this insurgency. Its weakness -- that it is both leaderless and bubbling up everywhere -- is also its strength. No one can remove the leader of a revolt if there is no leader. Conversely, people often don't know whom they're dealing with. Such was the case near Maskanah in the northeast, where two nighttime patrols with different FSA groups got into a fire fight because each of them thought the other was the enemy.

In Khafsah, near Aleppo, we happened upon a scene in which the representative of one FSA brigade, the "Free Men of the Euphrates," was demanding the return of two cars from another FSA brigade, the "Army of the Holy Sites," which had confiscated the cars at a checkpoint.

"Ahmed said they had to seize the cars!" said one man.

Another man, wrinkling his brow, replied: "Which Ahmed?"

"Well, Ahmed..."

"We have many Ahmeds."

Our routes also created a picture of reality, because our progress followed a topography of religious detours. In Hama Province in central Syria, for example, the villages of the Alawites and those of the Sunnis, who make up the majority of the insurgents, are close together.

"In the past, we were just neighbors," said a driver who normally worked as a shepherd. He took wide detours to keep away from every Alawite village "because that's where the Shabiha have their guards posted." The "Shabiha," or "ghosts," are the militias that have been armed by the regime since the beginning of the uprising. Most are Alawites, and they are repeatedly told that the rebels intend to kill them all.

In all of our months of travel, we happened upon only two Alawite villages that had remained neutral. We had to drive around the rest, near Hama, Homs and Idlib.

Staged Bombings?

But the erosion of the old power continues, especially now that those who served as the nucleus of the government machine for decades -- party officials, officers and bureaucrats -- are also changing sides. In the town of Tulul al-Humr, in the grasslands southeast of Hama, the entire pro-regime leadership has defected. We happened upon a group consisting of the former mayor, an intelligence agent, a few officials and the local leader of the Baath Party, which has served as a tool for the Assads to cultivate their family dictatorship.

"Every week a fax arrived from headquarters telling us about the next party meeting," said the former party official, describing the beginning of the rebellion. "It stated what I was to tell the others about the universal Zionist conspiracy, and about Saudis and al-Qaida paying foreign terrorists to fight in Syria." Taking a deep breath, he added: "You know, my sons went out into the streets. I couldn't do it anymore." He broke along with the system. "I don't even know if they're looking for me now," he said. He kept all the faxes, but the thermal paper doesn't do well in the Syrian heat, and the language about "universal conspiracies" was fading as the paper darkened.

The claims of a "Zionist conspiracy" once invoked in much of the Arab world have slowly faded, even in Syria. But things are more complicated when it comes to al-Qaida and the jihadists.

There has been a series of bombings of the offices of Syrian intelligence in Damascus and Aleppo since the end of 2011. Curiously, the bombers managed to make it through all security checkpoints to reach the main buildings of the heavily guarded complexes, but usually at times when they were almost empty. In elaborately produced videos, which soon surfaced on jihadist web forums, a previously unknown group named "Jabhat al-Nusra," or "Al-Nusra Front," a

group led by "Emir" Abu Mohammed al-Julani, assumed responsibility for the bombings. The group looked like a new arm of al-Qaida.

But in early 2012, no one in the opposition was familiar with Jabhat al-Nusra or its ominous leader. The rebels accuse the regime of inventing the Islamist group and assigning the blame for the entire rebellion on al-Qaida.

There are signs that the regime was involved. As it turned out, the alleged victims of the attacks were in fact already dead, while others who were supposedly dead suddenly walked across the screen when they thought the cameras had been turned off.

After attacks on the local intelligence headquarters in Aleppo, a doctor at the military hospital there told us: "We were responsible for military intelligence. After the explosion in February, a dozen bodies and about 100 wounded were brought to us. The strange thing about it was that the detonation happened at 8:30 a.m. People get up late in Aleppo, and none of the officers is in the office before 11. The victims were security guards."

The doctor says that he happened to be nearby, on his way to the doctors' union, when there was an attack on the "political security force" on March 18. "I heard the powerful detonation and, thinking that there must have been many dead, I ran over there immediately. All I saw was a man with a scratch on his arm, but no one else."

Islamist Connections

In September, two captured Shabiha leaders from Aleppo stated, independently of one another, that they had received explosives from air force intelligence several times and had been told to detonate them in various parts of the city-- under orders from the intelligence commander in Aleppo, Adib Salame.

But while Jabhat al-Nusra members were nowhere to be found in the spring in the otherwise rather open rebel community, groups calling themselves "al-Nusra" did in fact surface all over the country in August. We encountered them in Aleppo, Maskanah, Dayr Hafir and Habul, Deir el-Zour in the east and in Idlib Province.

While the groups have little knowledge of one another, they all dispute having anything to do with the major attacks in Damascus and Aleppo. "But everyone recognizes the name," the group's leader in Maskanah said apologetically. "Okay, it comes from the regime, but now we've just made it our own." We heard the same thing in other places, namely that anyone could establish an al-Nusra cell.

It gradually became apparent that the attacks and videos claiming responsibility were not just making an impression on Western terrorism experts, who promptly began using the phrase "al-Qaida in Syria," but also on Sunni financiers, mostly in Saudi Arabia -- financiers with a penchant for funding jihad.

In this way, al-Nusra -- rebel brigades with Islamist connections -- indeed began to take shape. They remained small compared with the FSA, but they attracted foreign jihadists from the Persian Gulf, Jordan and North Africa. "They have different religious ideas, but they fight with us for the same goal," says Colonel Abdel Jabbar al-Okaidi, one of the leaders of the rebel military council in Aleppo.

When the US government finally declared al-Nusra a terrorist group, it had the unintended effect of providing the various groups using the same name with a level of popularity they had previously lacked. "First the Americans didn't help us for so long, and now they want to tell us who is allowed to fight with us here?" says a commander, echoing the sentiments of many in the country.

A Country Destroying Itself

The face of the war changed in late summer 2012, when the regime stopped using tanks. Instead, like a horrible downburst, death came from the air. It followed us from town to town in September, when we were traveling in the north. In Maskanah, we started running when we saw everyone else running, and we dove headlong into a basement in the nick of time, when the entire building was already shaking from the blast of a shell that had struck two buildings away, creating an enormous cloud of dust. The next shell struck two minutes later, designed to hit the crowd of rescuers and curious onlookers. "They always do it that way," said a bystander, brushing the dust from his shirt.

The next morning in Deir Hafir, half an hour's drive from Maskanah, a plane flew directly above us before bombing its target, the largest animal feed warehouse in the district.

By noon the next day, we were back in Maraa visiting Yassir al-Hajja, the owner of the small café, who had been trying for months to assemble something resembling a rebel town administration. We almost didn't see the plane that attacked a nearby local refrigerated warehouse, knocking it over like a bird of prey. Six people died when two shells struck near the loading dock. An FSA fighter and relative of the dead snapped when we tried to photograph the site, turning his weapon on Yassir and shouting at us to get lost. The owner of the warehouse tried to calm him down, explaining that it was right to document what was happening.

"It won't stop," the old man in the village near Homs had said in the winter of 2011. I thought to myself that this must be what it feels like during a rampage, when someone suddenly turns up and only wants to kill people. The difference is that this rampage isn't over after an hour, but just keeps on going.

We spent the night on the outskirts of the town, and the next morning we saw an approaching L-39, normally a training aircraft. Then we saw the plane dive and drop two bombs, which looked tiny in the distance. We saw clouds of smoke shoot up into the air and heard the booming noise of the explosions. The bombs had struck the last remaining local garbage truck and two men selling fuel from a barrel. Two days later, in the early morning hours, a bomb destroyed the registration office in Maraa.

"Assad, or we'll burn the country down!" This slogan, scrawled on bullet-riddled walls, is the government's entire program, its only claim to power. Now the jets were appearing every day, in town after town, evidence of a country destroying itself.

No One to Help

Yassir, sitting at his small plywood desk that is riddled with bullet holes, says that he can't watch any more funerals. At the beginning, we were still able to convince him to go with us.

But since the last funeral we attended, we too are losing our ability to stomach them anymore. The remains of five young rebels from Maraa were being buried, or what was left of them after their homemade rocket exploded before it was launched. "That wasn't the plan," Yassir mumbled. His words could have applied to many things.

It wasn't the plan that a pastry chef would be mixing explosives and a plumber would be building rockets. It wasn't the plan that neighboring villages would become mortal enemies, and that the attempt to build a different Syria would be destroyed in a hail of bombs. Yassir would still like to become a member of parliament one day, "if I survive this," he says.

In the fog of Idlib, on our eighth journey, we search for three Adjini cousins, university lecturer Aziz, who believed in sarcasm and reason, and the two others. What happened to them, we wonder?

We don't find them in Kurin, which has become a ghost town. We finally catch up with Aziz in front of a hut in the hills, unshaven and wearing tracksuit pants. He is thinner.

Aziz wanted to overcome fear, and he didn't want to shoot. That was in April, but now he's a different person. Today he wants to booby-trap washing machines, microwaves and TV sets, turning them into hidden bombs. He came up with the idea when he heard the rumor that the army was returning to Kurin once again. "And when they start looting here again," he says, "boom!"

His cousin Mahmoud, the officer who had defected, has indeed captured three tanks with his group. And Mohammed, the formerly conformist school director, now complains about the rockets that have broken all the windows in his house. "But he doesn't ask where they're coming from," says Aziz.

The army never returned, but now the planes have come instead. Just days ago, they dropped a cluster bomb on an oil mill in the neighborhood, where farmers were waiting with their olive harvest. Nine were killed. "These people waited the entire year so that they could press their olives," says Aziz.

He has become hardened and bitter. He says that he can understand those who shout "Allahu akbar" and place their faith in God. "Who else has helped us?" he asks. "No one."