Rehumanising the Syrian conflict: photographs of war, health, and life in Syria

The Syrian conflict, which marked its seventh anniversary on March 15, is one of the most live-imaged wars in modern times. Syrian citizen-activists and others have transmitted images extensively to tell the story of the conflict with the hope that this may draw support and change their plight. International media also draw heavily on images—themes of violence, suffering, destruction, and displacement dominate.

That the world does not act, despite the many gruesome images of the conflict, became evident after the release of more than 50,000 so-called Caesar Photographs that included images of 6,868 detainees with identification numbers who are understood to have died in Government of Syria custody between 2011 and August, 2013. Images of violations and suffering, even when presented as evidence, are no guarantee for global action on violence and injustice. Photographs from Syria raise three important and interrelated issues. The first concerns the treatment of images of violence. Pictures of nameless mutilated bodies and broken spirits, torture, and killing are on constant display, both on international media networks and social media. Syrian writers have debated this subject. On the other hand, these images, typically displayed without the consent of an identifiable person or their family, depersonalise and undermine the dignity of the people photographed and their families. On the other hand, some have argued that since the images exist we must make sense of them through directly “gazing into the atrocious”. Such gazing is necessary to comprehend the Syrian tragedy and its meanings. It allows us to start questioning ourselves and our histories, societies, and cultures—locally and globally—about our collective responsibility for the atrocities, and to develop new critical writings and ethics that absorb and represent the gruesome violence. As these images capture the radical moment of both Syria’s collapse and a world in crisis, they need to be archived, studied, and used in transitional justice to contribute to creating a memory of this terrible time so Syrians and others can work together in the quest for a more just world.

The second issue is the global use of the images. All too often, the world stares at Syria but sees mainly numbers—killed, drowned, besieged, evacuated—or reacts only momentarily to occasional iconic images, such as that of a drowned child, until they fade and are replaced by newer pictures. Violent images from Syria have entered a global economy in which images are consumed as part of a “spectacle” of violence and indignity—their proliferation an obstacle to visibility. Even when such images are used for advocacy, or for humanitarian mobilisation for support and funding, the plethora of images risks normalising Syrian deaths and blurs issues of justice and responsibility. Some have advocated, based on the Syrian case, for a universal “right to the image” to protect people and families in war.

A third issue is the differing representations of victims of violence, war, or terrorism in global media. Such media do not typically feature violent images of western victims of conflict but readily show Syrian and other victims. The former have names, faces from earlier, happier times, and life stories, whereas the latter usually don’t even when their images are used to advocate for justice. This observation raises questions about the differential value of life and its representation, the sanctity of the body, and the right to privacy and dignity. Can an image revalorise such a life?

We believe it can. Our purpose in the photographs featured here is to document the impacts of the conflict in Syria and rehumanise the conflict through focusing on affected people and communities. We also hope to engage readers in critical discussion about images of violence and the representation of individuals affected by war. For this collection of images, Syrian photographers travelled in their communities and took pictures of people and places across Syria—in government-controlled and non-government-controlled areas—where people live, work, resist, seek help, or die.

These photographs draw on the experiences of the Humans of Syria (HOS) Network. Launched in 2015, HOS is an independent initiative with more than 70 volunteers of professional photographers, translators, editors, designers, and a coordinator. It aims to document stories from beyond the battle lines, highlighting the details that make us human, capturing stories of daily life, survival, hardship, and hope. Avoiding shocking images, the photos shown here depict people in context—with names (indicated when permitted), histories, and places—not as mere victims. The photos, presenting both health themes and images of daily life during conflict, were taken by photographers whose work involves risk. They do so to tell a story, attempting to rehumanise the Syrian conflict. We hope these images and the issues raised will engage readers and provoke critical discussion and inquiry about the role of war photography in health scholarship and research.

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Malnutrition under siege in Eastern Ghouta, photo by Firas Abdullah

Mustafa is 8 years old and lives with his parents and six brothers and sisters in Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus. With Eastern Ghouta under prolonged siege, Mustafa and his family have been impoverished and have less and less access to food. Mustafa has developed malnutrition, his weight is down to 27 kg from 30 kg. “During the night, Mustafa’s hunger pain increases and he tumbles on the floor holding his stomach and asking for food. My heart is broken for him. He should be much taller and stronger. He keeps staring at anything with long silence and he barely speaks”, Mustafa’s mother said. Mustafa is one of hundreds of children suffering from malnutrition in besieged Eastern Ghouta.
A mobile dental clinic in northern Syria, photo by Khalil Ashawi

Dr. Mohamad Kakepour, a graduate of Aleppo University, is a dentist from Azaz, a city in the north countryside of Aleppo in Syria. He works in a mobile dental clinic donated by an expatriate Syrian medical charity, seeing about 30 adult and child patients every day. “Dentistry was affected a lot by the ongoing conflict. Because of multiple displacements, many people have no access to dental services and use painkillers as a temporary solution”, he said. He works in the clinic with one nurse. “Our ambition is to have other mobile clinics and bigger staff so we can reach all the places that are in need.”
A bombed-out field hospital in Daraa, southern Syria, photo by Mahmoud Solaiman

This photo was taken the morning after the Field hospital of Daraa Al-Balad was targeted at night by an air strike. The destruction of the hospital was substantial. The sterilisation and operations rooms were particularly affected. The staff, including nurses and doctors, were in a shock, trying to clean up and fix the damages. They were expecting injuries and emergency cases after the city was targeted during the night. Field hospitals are very important as they serve people in need when the regular hospitals have been destroyed or are out of service.
A bombed-out field hospital in Darra, southwestern Syria, photo by Mahmoud Sukhman

The field hospital of Darra Al-Balad the morning after an airstrike. A member of staff said: “We will clean the hospital from this dust and destruction, and continue our work. We won’t stop even on this terrible day.”
Kurdish Red Crescent workers in Amouda, Al-Hasakah Governorate, northwestern Syria, photo by Jiyan Haj Youssuf

Jameela (centre) is co-president of the Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC). She was born in the village of Sarjik, in Amouda. She was working at the Qamishli National Hospital (a governorate adjacent to Al-Hasakah) but moved to work with KRC after 2012 to help in relief efforts. With the war, “we were paralysed in light of the increasing health needs and the absence of some health services in northern Syria”, she said. Jameela and her colleagues have continued their work throughout the conflict. “I feel relieved and forget what I am exposed to when I am treating and serving the people according to the oath that we swore in by the Kurdish [Red] Crescent that there are no limits to our services and we treat everyone and we are not affiliated with any political party.”
An amputee of war in Idlib, northwestern Syria, photo by Ahmad Mousahid, a photographer from Daraya who was evacuated to Idlib

In 2015, several shells fell in Al Waer, a Homs (central Syria) neighbourhood, where Duaa and her friends were playing. Duaa’s leg was amputated and her mother died. Her father, a butcher, was injured and became disabled, unable to work. They moved to Eastern Ghouta in search of a safe haven, but soon the situation there worsened too. They returned to Al Waer where they lived for 2 years under siege before they were forcibly displaced again to Idlib with other people of Al Waer. Duaa has not been to school for the past 6 years. She needs a prosthesis and thinks getting one will help her go back to school. She often gets around by jumping on one leg because she dislikes crutches.
Millet farming grows strongly in northern Sudan, where it is the main crop for about 60% of the population. In the region of Kordofan, some of the largest nurseries are located near the towns of Al-Fashir, Darfur, and Zalawadi. The nursery near the town of Al-Fashir specializes in the cultivation of various species of millet, including white, blue, and green varieties. The nursery near Darfur focuses on the cultivation of millet varieties that are adapted to the local climate and soil conditions. The nursery near Zalawadi produces millet varieties that are resistant to drought and heat stress.
Wooding for fuel in Eastern Ghouta, photo by Sameer Al Daumy

A man cuts down a tree for firewood in the town of Harameh, in besieged Eastern Ghouta. Because of the prolonged siege by the Syrian Government, which blocks entry of basic necessities such as food, medication, and fuel, people have started cutting trees to use firewood for cooking and heating. Access to necessities has deteriorated since the end of 2017, when smuggling routes and tunnels were destroyed in a government offensive to retake Eastern Ghouta.
The town’s only orthopaedic doctor in besieged southern Damascus, photo by Mohammad Abo Kasem

In 2012, Ammar Essah was a medical student in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Damascus and a peaceful activist. He had to escape the security branch attached to the university after he was accused of “incitement to demonstration”. At the suggestion of a friend, he moved to southern Damascus to help those injured during demonstrations. The area later fell under government siege. Although his family members are elsewhere, “I chose to stay there”, he said. While he had no formal training in orthopaedics, he had to respond to the many injuries coming his way. “I became a bone doctor without a supervisor and without even essential equipment”, he said. “I was forced to become the only orthopaedic doctor for the besieged people in southern Damascus”, he said.
An injured rescue worker, photo by Ahmad Mujahid, a photographer from Daraya who was evacuated to Idlib

Omar was born in 1993 in Daraya. His family owned a construction business so he was highly skilled in operating construction vehicles. Towards the end of 2012 when Daraya was under siege by pro-government forces, he and other volunteers went into relief and rescue. He pulled civilians from the rubble, cleared the road for the ambulances, and put up sandbag barricades to protect civilians from snipers. In 2015, a bulldozer he was riding was targeted and he sustained debilitating injuries. He remained in the area under siege and without access to necessary treatments until he was forced, along with most residents of Daraya, to leave with his family to a nearby city. Omar has not yet received the treatments he needs. He says that only the remembrance of the souls he saved eases his sorrows.
From law to nursing in besieged southern Damascus, photo by Mohammad Abou Kassem

Mahmoud (right) was studying law at the Faculty of Law at the Lebanese University in Beirut, Lebanon, when the uprising started in 2011. He moved to Damascus University in Syria and finished the first year. He said he stopped his studies after being arrested twice and his name was placed on a blacklist on the government's security checkpoints. He moved to Babbila, southern Damascus, and started working in health aid. With no access to formal nursing education or training, he took several intensive nursing courses and learned on the job. He won first place in the theoretical and practical tests of the general medical authority in southern Damascus. "I will continue my work at Babbila Health Center, as it is highly needed in this besieged area with lack of medical staff," he said.
Attacks on ambulances in Daraa, southern Syria, photo by Mahmoud Tolaiman

This photo was taken on a day residents of Daraa describe as horrific. Warplanes targeted the city. The field hospital of Daraa Al-Balad, which had been hit 2 months earlier, was again targeted and completely destroyed. The photo shows an ambulance for the Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets) damaged due to an attack. Syrian Civil Defence volunteers, who were on their way to ride the ambulance, were lucky that they hadn’t made it to the car when it was targeted. The ambulance was rendered inoperable.
Children playing on missile remnants in southern Syria, photo by Mahmoud Sulaiman

Children play in Quwayba town, Daraa countryside, southern Syria. This missile fell in a civilian area, causing destruction but no injuries. Village children gathered and started to play and jump over it. One of the children said: “We don't have play gardens and swings to play with, so we want to play over this missile.” Many children have been injured or killed throughout Syria when approaching such remnants of war.