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People on the move: The impact of Syria's conflict, as felt from afar



Syrian human rights activist Husam Helmi has been living in London throughout the armed conflict.

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Syrian human rights activist Husam Helmi

It has already been well-documented how masses of people get displaced during armed conflict, often facing perilous journeys and precarious situations when they are settled in camps to ride out the worst of the hostilities.

But war also impacts those already living abroad, who watch from afar – waiting and worrying about how friends and loved ones back home are faring amid the ongoing horrors.

Husam Helmi, 33, had already been living and studying in London for four years when fighting broke out in his native Syria in mid-2011. His parents and siblings remained in Daraya, a suburb to the south of the Syrian capital Damascus, until they safely escaped to Egypt earlier this year.

"The hardest thing has been to watch while the country I grew up in is being destroyed," Husam Helmi told Amnesty International.

"The tragedy is not only inside, but also outside Syria," he said, referring to the dire situation of the more than 1.5 million refugees who have been forced to flee.

Although not a refugee himself, like other Syrians living abroad, Husam felt personally devastated by what was happening in his country. But his despair led him to try to make a difference to those – including his family – who were still back home.

Long-time activist

For most of his adult life, Husam has belonged to various activist groups seeking redress for human rights violations carried out by governments across the Middle East and North Africa.

In Syria itself, he remembers sensing profound frustration and anger among segments of the population – about endemic corruption, restrictions on dissent and other issues that bubbled beneath the surface.

“People weren’t happy,” he says, recalling his second visit back to the country from London in September 2010.

But almost nobody expected the massive popular uprising that began gathering steam in Syria in early 2011, inspired by other mass protests in the Middle East and North Africa.

When it happened, Husam and other Syrians living abroad contacted one another to brainstorm ways to try to help activists inside the country.

He joined the [Syrian Nonviolence Movement](#), aimed at training activists in nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. And later, after the armed conflict broke out, he became a member of [Freedom Days](#), an umbrella group for non-governmental organizations both inside and outside Syria.

Giving a voice to the uprising

But perhaps the most important role Husam has played since the Syrian conflict began was as a co-founder of the independent newspaper Enab Baladi.

The weekly paper, based in Husam’s hometown of Daraya, is entirely funded by activists. Since it opened in early 2012, it has published 65 editions online and now has some 25 people on staff. Most are students and activists rather than trained journalists, but Husam notes that as time has gone by, they have honed their reporting techniques.

And they have access to a daily reality that even hardened foreign correspondents find difficult. The issues they cover include news of detentions of activists and features on individuals amid the ongoing conflict – showing the impact on civilians of the fighting by all sides, something that is often glossed over or ignored by Syrian state media.

Although initially focused on covering the impact of President Bashar al-Assad’s crackdown on the Daraya area, as the paper has grown, it has also begun to rely on correspondents in Idlib, Aleppo and elsewhere in the country to keep people abreast of developments there too.

With the movement of international media highly restricted within Syria, Husam says that the Enab Baladi model has been replicated in cities across the country.

Ironically, it took the deterioration of Syria’s human rights and security situation for these types of local newspapers to find their voice – before the uprising they were simply not tolerated, and ordinary Syrians were too afraid to speak out.

“When these newspapers appeared on the streets or online, it was even scarier for the government than the proliferation of arms – they can’t control thought,” Husam explains.

But what they can do is try to silence the critical voices – and since its founding, Enab Baladi has lost an editor and two other staff members, all of them killed amid the conflict.

Husam has no way of knowing for sure if they were targeted for their reporting – a [recent Amnesty International report](#) highlighted how dangerous it has become to be a reporter in Syria

But he does know that released detainees have reported being questioned in custody about the newspaper’s staff and activities.

Building a new Syria

Husam acknowledges that, when the current armed conflict comes to an end, immense work will need to be done to rebuild Syria. It's not just the institutions, housing and infrastructure that have taken a battering in the fighting – ordinary Syrians will need economic and education opportunities in order to restore their dignity.

Husam sees Enab Baladi – and other independent newspapers begun in the past two years – as being a key step towards achieving a free media, an important building block in the construction of a new Syria.