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Divided town of Deir Ezzour is a microcosm of Syria's bitter conflict

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As the threat of military intervention looms over an alleged chemical weapons attack near Damascus, in a far flung corner of Syria the town of Deir Ezzour offers an insight into the suffering of ordinary Syrians.

Once a thriving hub of Syria's oil industry, today Deir Ezzour has become a bleak microcosm of the Syrian conflict. The town, on the banks of the Euphrates River, some 450km north-east of the capital, is divided. Half is under the control of Syrian government forces and the other half is in the hands of armed opposition fighters, who also control much of the surrounding areas all the way to the Iraqi border.

Few outsiders make it to this isolated corner of Syria. No human rights organizations and only a handful of journalists have visited the town. The opposition-controlled section of the town is the only area I can access as the Syrian government has banned Amnesty International and other human rights organizations from areas of the country under its command. The streets are eerily quiet and much of the town is in ruin. Many of the residents have fled. The empty shells of burned and bombed-out buildings line the streets – a testament to the unrelenting air strikes, artillery, mortar and tank shelling by President Bashar al-Assad's troops.

The only way in or out of Deir Ezzour is across a bridge which regularly comes under sniper fire from government forces. There is, unsurprisingly, little traffic. A few taxis ferry residents back and forth, driving at breakneck speed to dodge the bullets.

Those who dare to cross - civilians and fighters alike - are often killed or injured in the process. Within two hours of my arrival in the town, I am at a local hospital, where the reality of that risk strikes home. A young man who was shot while crossing the bridge is brought in and pronounced dead almost immediately. He never stood a chance; a large calibre bullet had had left a gaping wound in his head.

Everyone I meet has lost relatives and friends, many in the constant indiscriminate bombardments, while others have been summarily executed.

Abd al-Wahed Hantush, a 38-year-old firefighter, lost six members of his family last October. His mother, wife and two children were killed when their car came under fire as they tried to cross from a government-controlled area back to the other side of town. His brother and sister-in-law were also killed in the incident, along with dozens of other civilians.

"They had gone to visit my sister in the al-Jura district of the city, which is under the control of government forces," Abd al-Wahed told me. "There was no way back except through the hills

on the outskirts of the city. There are often government soldiers in that area, but it was the only way."

They never made it back. Their bodies – slaughtered and half-burned - were discovered the following day.

Abd al-Wahed's eyes well up with tears as he shows me photographs of his five-year-old daughter, Sham, and his three-year-old son, Abderrahman, on his mobile phone. "They were all I had; I've lost everything," he said.

Abd al-Wahed has cuts and burns on his face, neck, chest and arms. Four days earlier he had gone to put out a fire in a house which was hit by a rocket.

"When I got there another rocket fell and exploded very near where I was," he says. He is lucky to have got away with relatively minor injuries. Two more rockets struck the area soon afterwards.

Rockets and shells pound the city day and night, smashing into residential buildings or landing in the streets. For the civilians left in town there is little they can do to keep safe. The nights are punctuated by the thumping sound of incoming artillery and occasionally the sound of outgoing mortars fired by the armed opposition groups reverberates across the town. Everywhere, fragments of the Grad rockets fired by government forces from a hill overlooking the town litter the ground.

I visit a family with two small children who are now living in their shop in the basement of a building. "There is shelling all the time but sometimes it is unbearable. During the week of 23 May it was relentless. Batteries of 12 rockets would land in quick succession. It went on at that pace for two weeks; it was impossible to go out even to get bread," the children's father explained. "We avoid going out as far as we can; here we are a bit protected." Few families have a basement in which to shelter.

A children's playground in one corner of the town has been converted into a cemetery. Tombstones surround the colourful slides, no longer in use as children are now kept indoors to protect them from the relentless shelling. Some of the graves belong to children who used to play there.

In one corner of the deserted playground is a particularly well-tended grave. It belongs to 11-year-old Ahmad Karjusli, who was killed on 19 October last year. Local residents tell me that the child's mother spends every afternoon by his grave. Later that day, I find her there - alone and crying. Her mobile phone lay on the grave mound playing religious music.

"I only had two children and Ahmad was my youngest, my darling," she tells me. "He was such a good boy. My life is empty without him. Why was he taken from me? I cannot bear the pain."

She shows me photographs of him on her mobile phone; he looks very much like his mum. Ahmad was standing by his own front door along with a four-year-old neighbour, Abderrahman Rayyash, when a shell landed in the street and killed them both.

Everywhere in Deir Ezzour the tragedy the Syrian conflict has wrought on the ordinary lives of its residents is clear.

Even the town's medical facilities have not been spared. Field hospitals are set up in secret locations, to protect them from attacks by government forces. During a visit to one small and under-resourced hospital, I meet Ahmad, a 30-year-old father of three young children who is paralyzed from the waist down.

“I went out to buy milk and other things for the children and a shell landed near me in the street in the Jbala area of the city,” he says.

His spinal cord is fractured in six places. He does not know it yet, but the doctor tells me he is unlikely to ever walk again.

“There was a huge explosion and a woman standing nearby was killed on the spot. I am a civilian, not a fighter,” Ahmad says. “I used to be a mechanic but now I have not been able to work for a whole year. I cannot afford to look after my family.”

At the same hospital another doctor tells me about the many victims of the bombardments whom he has treated, and about those he could not save. Among them were his niece and nephew, a girl of 13, Nour, and her 15-year-old brother, Omar: “Two shells struck the room they were sleeping in and killed them both.”

As well as the continuous indiscriminate bombings, civilians in Deir Ezzour have also come under direct attacks. Witnesses told me how government forces in the al-Jura and al-Qusur districts of the city summarily executed scores of residents last September as they took control of the areas, flushing out armed opposition fighters. Residents, including women and children, were rounded up from the streets or seized from their homes and killed.

On the way out of Deir Ezzour I go to the nearby town of Hatla to investigate an incident of sectarian violence in which several civilians were killed in June

Most of the victims were from the small Shi’a Muslim community in this predominately Sunni Muslim town. Children and other civilians not involved in the conflict were among the dead. Following the incident, videos were posted online showing armed opposition fighters referring to those killed as supporters of President Bashar al-Assad. They called them “Shi’a dogs” and other derogatory terms.

Today there are no Shi’a Muslims left in Hatla. All of them fled to government-controlled areas shortly after the killings. However, the evidence left behind speaks for itself. Every single one of their homes – located in two different parts of the town – was ransacked and then blown up. The Shia mosque was likewise destroyed. Neighbours tell me that immediately after the clashes the homes were looted and some were set on fire. Indeed there is no sign of any furniture in the rubble, only a few clothes and children’s toys. The day before my visit armed opposition fighters returned to the village and blew up all the houses.

Some of the residents refuse to speak to me about the incident but the ones that do condemn these as acts of gratuitous vandalism and destruction. One tells me that many of the men in the Shi’a community co-operated with the army to plan attacks and ambushes against opposition forces. However, he too condemns the destruction of the homes of his Shi’a neighbours.

Some of the residents blame the clashes and the destruction on “extremists and foreign jihadists” seeking to incite trouble in the area. “We always lived in peace as good neighbours. Why this now? This is very wrong,” one resident says. Another resident tells me that the leader of an armed opposition group who was wounded in the clashes on 11 June had died of his wounds the previous day and that his fighters came and blew up the Shi’a residents’ homes in revenge for his death.

It is impossible to know for certain what happened on 11 June. What seems clear is that armed clashes resulted in deaths on both sides, and that civilians from the Shi’a community were deliberately killed. I am told by residents that among the civilian victims were three elderly men, who had apparently been trying to mediate between the two sides, and at least one woman and her two children..

A few kilometres west of Hatla in the village of al-Sawa, I find the remains of another three Shi'a holy sites which were also blown up by armed fighters some 10 days earlier. There too residents blame the attacks on "radical Islamists". These attacks seem aimed at sending a clear message to the now displaced Shi'a residents of the area that they cannot return.

As happens all too often in the Syrian conflict, it is civilians who bear the brunt of the spiralling violence. In Deir Ezzour, as elsewhere, the suffering is also hardening feeling among a civilian population who feel increasingly abandoned by the rest of the world. When I mentioned to people in Deir Ezzour that I wanted to investigate what happened in Hatla some expressed disapproval and others discouraged me from going. Many were distinctly unsympathetic to the plight of their Shi'a neighbours and others worried that what I would discover could tarnish the image of the Syrian uprising.

Pain, loss and anger can make people blind or indifferent to the suffering of others. This is something I have come across all too often in the many conflicts and wars I have worked on over many years and Syria is no different. The longer this increasingly brutal conflict goes on, the greater the damage will be to the very fabric of Syrian society - and the harder it will be for the wounds of this conflict to heal.

This is why the inaction of the international community is all the more reprehensible. Had world leaders had the political will to overcome their divisions and put pressure on the parties involved in this conflict earlier on to resolve the crisis, many thousands of lives could have been saved. The crisis in Syria has deteriorated so far that it is today infinitely more difficult to address. But looking the other way is not the solution. A referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court by the UN Security Council would send a powerful message to those committing war crimes on all sides of the conflict, government and opposition alike. Perhaps a realistic prospect of being held accountable for their crimes could make many choose a different course of action.

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