

# Damascus: What's Left

[Sarah Birke](#) August 2, 2013, 10:05 am



*Zhang Naijie/Xinhua Press/CorbisA soldier standing guard in the old city of Damascus, June 21, 2013*

One morning on a recent visit to Damascus, my first in a year, I went to the Umayyad Mosque. One of the oldest mosques in existence, the spectacular building was a Roman temple and then an early Christian basilica before it became what many Muslims consider to be Islam's fourth holiest place of worship. As usual, it was full of families. Children skidded across the marble courtyard, women and men prayed or lounged, often talking on their cell phones. But the scene took on a different cast when I sat down with two women from the Damascus suburbs.

Fatia was from Jobar, a northeastern suburb strategically located on the ring road around the capital where clashes take place almost every day between regime and rebel forces. Her house had recently been destroyed

by the regime's shelling and she said she was now living with twenty others in central Damascus—she came here because it was the only safe place to go. The other woman, Manar, said her husband had been working in Daraya, a suburb that had been taken by rebels last fall and then come under an almost continuous assault by the Syrian army last winter. He had lost his job because the factory where he worked had been pulverized. “There are some people sleeping in mosques now because they have nowhere to go,” they told me. (People are forbidden from sleeping in the Umayyad Mosque, but smaller mosques are now full of displaced Syrians.) She was interrupted by the thud of a shell going off. “Maybe that was Jobar,” Fatia said.

While the brutal devastation caused by the Syrian conflict, now entering its third year, has affected many parts of the country, the Syrian government has long sought to portray the capital as an oasis of calm. Unlike Aleppo, parts of which have been destroyed by a year of battle, central Damascus shows few physical scars of war, apart from the many roadblocks and checkpoints, and the burned-out remains of a building northeast of the city that was bombed. Unlike Raqqa, a city in the east of Syria that is in the hands of extremist rebels, Damascus looks like a bastion of tolerant, vibrant life. In this view, the functioning city demonstrates both the continued strength of the regime and the dangers of the increasingly fractured opposition. But as my visit to the Umayyad Mosque revealed, under the surface things aren't the same in the Syrian capital.

The same day, I went out for dinner with a well-connected businessman—he went to school with Bashar al-Assad and Bashar's elder brother Bassel and has flourished under the regime, even more so since the crisis started. The restaurant served a take on continental food and any type of alcohol you might fancy. A coiffed young woman with a photo of Bashar as her iPhone cover sang songs as her smiling companions knocked back drinks at a price that would pay the rent of a displaced family for a month. At one point, the businessman got up to use the bathroom and something

clattered to the floor. It was a pistol. “Oh, that,” he said. “I am so afraid of being kidnapped. I would rather kill myself than have that happen to me.”

During my stay, visits to a half-dozen different central neighborhoods made clear to me that the regime is far from on its last legs—at least here. The economy trundles along, largely propped up by funds from the Iranian government—which has injected at least \$4 billion into Syria since the conflict began. Women bustle around the souqs, which remain open even as some shops have closed. Hotels which a year ago were contemplating closing their doors are doing a better trade now, thanks to well-to-do Syrians who have fled to the capital. The emptiness of the restaurants in the winding alleys and courtyard houses of the Old City is compensated for by ever increasing numbers of street vendors selling everything from headscarves to cigarettes to the displaced population.

But the war is close. Major battles between regime forces and opposition groups have been fought in almost every Damascus suburb encircling the city, from Douma and Harasta to even closer areas like Barzeh and Jobar. After rebels made some advances near the capital in the summer and fall of 2012—much touted as “final” battles only to be repelled—many neighborhoods along the outskirts of the city, including Jobar and Daraya, were pounded with shelling by the regime. (At present, part of Ghouta, an area east of Damascus, are in rebel control, though recent gains by the regime are putting increasing pressure on it.)

One day, I went to Harasta, a suburb just a stone’s throw northeast of the city center. The road was full of twisted metal and burned out cars. “Drive fast along the two hundred meter stretch ahead of you because there are snipers,” a soldier warned my driver. We proceeded but turned back because the shelling was too heavy, black smoke rising from an area close to the road. On another occasion, I was taking a taxi in Mezze, an area just west of the center, when the road was suddenly blocked off. A smoking car sat a few meters away. Some said it had exploded—one of the not

infrequent car bombs—others said a mortar had landed on it.

Yet the most noticeable change to the city since I lived here before the war is in the urban population itself. Damascus, which had an estimated five to six million inhabitants before the conflict began, never rivaled Cairo for intellectual life, or Beirut for sophistication. Yet it had enough of its own aspiring filmmakers and graying dissidents, worldly youth and wrinkled shop owners, and many highly-educated lawyers, doctors, and scholars. Now many professionals, the young, and even workers with sufficient savings to do so have left for Lebanon, Egypt, the Gulf, or further afield. In their place, the city has received a huge influx of poor and destitute people from the suburbs, who have moved to areas such as the Old City, often to live with family or friends, or to districts like Midan, a neighborhood just south of the center which is itself an area of unrest. They now live alongside the city's rich and apathetic who have stayed and who generally support the regime. (A group that, contrary to some of the common characterizations of the war, includes not just Alawites but privileged members of other sects—Sunnis and Christians.)

This made the city seem hollow to me. I took a walk round old haunts from the three years I spent living in Damascus. I peered through the grimy windows of Etana, a bookshop once filled with intellectuals, to see empty shelves and boxes. Mazen, the purveyor of all my nightdresses, was gone. The rug seller: gone. My favored jeweler: gone. In the place of shops that once sold artifacts to tourists, cheap stores toted nail polish and knock-off goods like "Luis Vutton" handbags. The few dissidents and intellectuals I found who hadn't left the city pass the hours talking of friends gone and times past, all the time fearing arrest. On July 18, one of them, Youssef Abdelke, a painter, was picked up by security forces. A longtime dissident who only returned to Syria in 2005, after spending years in jail under Bashar's father Hafez, he was detained along with two other members of an internal group that has been critical of the regime (all three are from different Syrian minorities—Christian, Alawite, and Druze) during another

wave of political arrests.

Another dissident, who has started to deliver clothes and medicine to the besieged suburbs on his own initiative, railed at the young people who left as soon as the going got tough, the very people needed to stand up to the regime. His friend chided him: “We all have to make our own choices. The guns became louder than they were.”

Many people who have stayed are surviving through informal support networks and help from volunteers like him. But they are struggling. Houses now hold a family per room. Sanctions have hurt ordinary people more than the regime. A falafel sandwich that used to cost 25 Syrian pounds now costs 65. (With the collapse of the Syrian currency, that is actually a drop in the equivalent price in dollars, but few earn in anything but Syrian pounds.) “Food costs as much as if you are staying in a five-star hotel,” Fatia remarked. Depression is widespread. “All we Syrians really wanted was a house and to earn enough for our children to get married, and now that has gone,” Fatia added.

The government says it is providing aid to the many displaced who have ended up in the city. But at the Ministry for National Reconciliation, an Orwellian-sounding government body set up in June 2012, supposedly to help Syrians affected by the war, I watched as people queued up to ask for help locating loved ones, only to be turned away by seemingly indifferent bureaucrats. One woman knew which security branch had been holding her son for the last five months—probably because he is a young male they think might join the opposition; her husband had simply disappeared without trace several months before. How could she survive, I wondered.

Officials for the Assad government seem to care little that the historical city they preside over is a shell of its former self. With gains against the opposition this spring culminating in the regime’s capture in June of Qusayr, a town on the Lebanese border, and renewed support from its allies Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia, the regime has a new confidence that

extends to many people I met in Damascus who support it.

To these loyalists, the recent course of the war—including the growing reports of more radical groups gaining an upper hand in some opposition regions—has given proof to their argument that the government is the last secular bastion in the region, attacked by a range of extremists funded by Gulf countries. The opposition fighters have done themselves no favors as the fight becomes dirtier. “I wanted a revolution but the regime played a clever game and won,” one young man told me, referring to the how the government stoked fears of sectarian violence, including, according to multiple reports in 2011, by releasing criminals, especially Islamists, from Seydnaya prison so they could join the opposition.

Others in the capital—like most of their compatriots living in rebel-held territory—vehemently disagree. They say they would rather die than live under the regime; and that it must be brought down regardless of the cost. A handful of prominent Damascenes such as Yassin Hajj-Saleh, a well-known writer, and Razan Zeitouneh, a lawyer who has been in hiding since the start of the uprising, have even moved to the rebel-held suburbs. (In mid-July, Hajj-Saleh, who is now in East Ghouta with no power or phone, and very little food, told *The Guardian*, “In Damascus, we faced the constant possibility of arrest and insufferable torture. Here we are safe from that, but not from a missile that could land on our heads at any minute.”) Nadia, a Syrian friend who works for an international aid agency, told me she likes to cross these lines and go to places such as Homs because the people and the revolution seem far more alive than in Damascus.

Indeed, as my week went on, the city seemed increasingly oppressive and reminded me of Syria in earlier years; people I met even compared it to the time before Bashar al-Assad. And whenever the shelling could be heard in the suburbs, I felt sick. On one particularly noisy morning, I found it strange that people did not flinch: a man sat on the steps of a drab concrete

structure sipping tea, a guard lolled in front of a government building and a line of people in a Western Union office—all waiting for remittances from relatives abroad—grew longer. Time and time again people I spoke to punctuated their sentences with *mafee hal*—“there is no solution.” “Obama and everyone else betrayed us. We have a problem with our opposition. And we have a problem with Islam,” a carpet trader told me. He described the talk of a Geneva peace conference as “a play” and a “delaying tactic” for the international community, since the regime won’t give up power. A businessman close to the regime described it more crudely as “masturbation.”

Many residents seem intent on avoiding the divisions of sect, class, and opinion that have erupted elsewhere in the country, though increasingly these divisions are creeping to the capital as well. Before the war some neighborhoods were divided by sect—Bab Touma was a predominantly Christian quarter of the Old City, Mezze 86 an Alawite stronghold. But many areas were mixed. Syrians prided themselves on not necessarily knowing someone’s religion. Today that is changing. In Alawite areas, which rebel fighters have targeted with mortars, there is a feeling of being under attack, but not one of regime suppression. In Sunni areas such as Midan, the security forces have not hesitated to shoot people. In other parts of the city, kidnappings of wealthy regime loyalists and their children—by criminal gangs and by some opposition groups usually seeking ransom money—are increasingly common.

Shalha and Nagham al-Shamali, two Christian sisters from Aleppo now living in a boutique hotel in the Old City, explained to me how Islam was the root of Syria’s problems as they sat around laughing with Sunni guests likewise exiled from their home cities. In the predominantly Alawite neighbourhood of Mezze 86, residents I spoke to railed at the Sunnis in the capital as they continued to live among them; influenced in part by images on state media, some said that Sunnis want to eliminate the Alawites.

With no other option, many I spoke to have found ways to adapt to the new situation. Frequently, I heard the quintessential Syrian expression *shoo bidna namel?*—“What can we do?” Others said, *tamsahna*, which means, “we have turned into a crocodile”—they have grown skin thick enough to cope. Long lines of traffic at checkpoints are a chance to smoke, one taxi driver said. (I joked that the war was shortening his life that way.)

Traditional rules of hospitality are rigidly observed lest a cornerstone of national identity slip away. Each house I visited offered tea, sweets, and more often than not a small gift. I got on a bus and a man who was already squashed into two seats with his three children immediately maneuvered them into a pile on his lap, so I could sit down, prodding one to “Say hello to her!”

Scarcely hidden beneath these familiar Syrian attitudes, however, is the sorrowful recognition that the city has already been irreversibly altered. The carpet trader I met talked of a friend, a former policeman, whom he used played cards with. The policeman started to come less and less frequently until he stopped. The policeman had joined Jabhat al-Nusra, the hard-line rebel group linked to al-Qaeda that now battles the policeman’s former colleagues. Nadia, the aid worker, has lost two close friends, one in the army and one fighting for the opposition. Another friend told me about a couple she knew who had settled in Beirut and had a baby. They had recently returned to take their infant to the Umayyad Mosque in case the next time they visited it is no longer standing.

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