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The New York Times

***What 'Victory' Looks Like: A
Journey Through Shattered Syria***

On an eight-day visit, New York Times journalists given rare access to Syria found ruin, grief and generosity. What was missing after eight years of civil war? Young men and a middle class.

Destroyed buildings and vendors' stands in Douma, Syria. The city was held by rebels for most of Syria's civil war.

By [Vivian Yee](#) Photographs by Meridith Kohut

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DOUMA, Syria — Picking our way around the ruins of the Damascus suburb of Douma, it took a little while to realize what was missing.

There were women carrying groceries, old men droning by on motorbikes and skinny children heaving jugs of water home.

But there were few young men.

They had died in the war, been thrown in prison or scattered far beyond Syria's borders. Now, it had fallen to survivors like Um Khalil, a 59-year-old, round-faced grandmother, to reckon with their absence.

Three of her sons had been killed. Another had been tortured in a rebel prison, and a fifth had disappeared into government detention. Her daughters-in-law had to start working, while she was raising five grandchildren without her husband. He had died in an airstrike.

"Sometimes I sit and think, how did this happen?" Um Khalil said in the apartment of a distant acquaintance, where her remaining family was squatting. "I had sons working. Everything was normal, and suddenly I lost them. I had a husband. I lost him, too. I have no answers. God forgive whoever was behind this."

Then she burst out: "Forgive them, don't forgive them, what difference does it make? I wish I could find whoever destroyed this city. I would kill him."

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Ruin and Recovery, Allotted Unequally

After eight years of civil war, the Syrian government now controls much of the country, and on Tuesday it appeared closer than ever to seizing control of Idlib, the last of the rebels' territory.

Whether President Bashar al-Assad will win has not been in doubt for some time. We — three journalists with The New York Times — had come to Syria to see what his victory looked like.

Visiting five government-held cities and villages over eight days in June, we found ruin and generosity, people grieving and people getting through the day. Suffering had been unequally distributed, landing most heavily on the poor and on former rebel-held areas. The recovery, too, was unevenly shared.

In Damascus, the capital, a gleaming \$310 million mall, built during the war not far from a mountain where government forces once launched artillery shells at rebel territory, echoed with the clacking of high-heeled shoppers.



The souk, or bazaar, in the Old City of Damascus. The Syrian capital largely avoided physical damage.
Meridith Kohut for The New York Times



Workers at a destroyed home in eastern Aleppo. People displaced by the war are trickling back, trying to rebuild their lives among the rubble. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

In nearby Douma, which was rebel-held for most of the war, running water was still more aspiration than reality. In the government stronghold of Latakia, on the Mediterranean coast, mothers wept beneath photographs of dead sons. More than two years after Mr. Assad retook the northern city of Aleppo, the factories and the ancient bazaars, or souks, were stirring again, but electricity was stuttering back one power-crew shift at a time.

It is not only infrastructure that needs rebuilding. The Syria we saw was missing a middle class, its members having fled or fallen down the economic ladder. The United Nations estimates that more than eight in 10 people are now living in poverty, making less than \$3.10 a day per person.

Even as the displaced trickle back home, young men are still being forced into the army, and dissidents, or those connected to them, are disappearing into grim prisons. People are still fleeing the country, though their numbers are far below what they were at their height.

With no reconstruction aid coming from international donors, the Syrians we met were doing what they could to patch the bullet holes in their walls, feed their children and find a paycheck.

And with so many men gone, this task has been left to the old, the very young and, especially, the women — including women from conservative families who are now working for the first time.

"I never thought I'd work, but it's better than having to go ask people for money," said Um Akil, a 40-year-old woman in eastern Aleppo. Her husband had been detained by the government — unfairly, she said — but she was surviving. She wanted her daughters to work when they finished school, she said, "so they don't face what I faced."

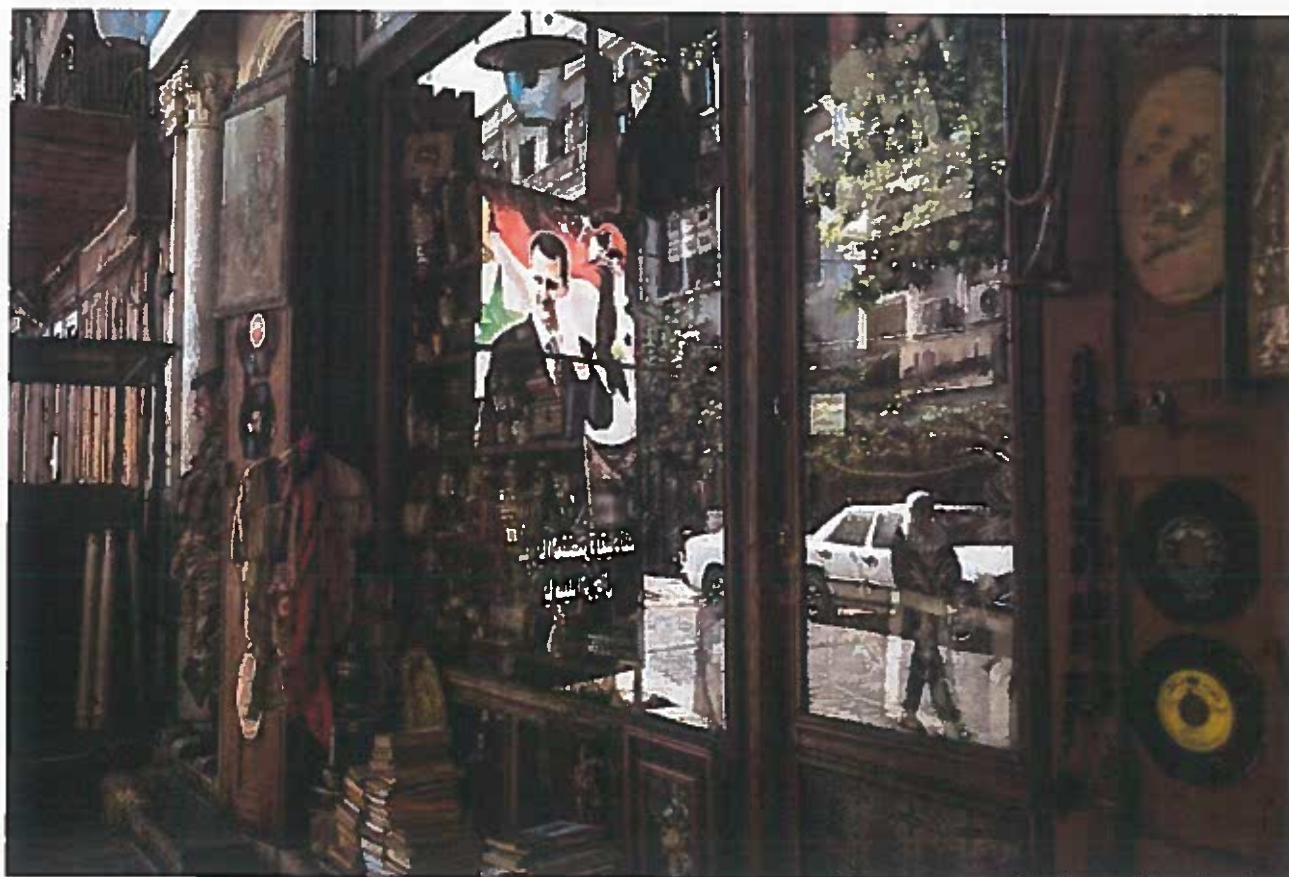
Assad Is Everywhere. So Are His Underlings.

Everywhere we went, it was impossible to forget who presided over the destruction, and who will preside over what comes next.

"Assad Forever," proclaimed a banner featuring Mr. Assad's image, one of many strung over Syrian roads.

His image rippled on banners at the entrances to recaptured cities. He watched from cigarette lighters hawked at Damascus souvenir stands, his face sandwiched between those of his backers, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah. At one army checkpoint we passed, there were no fewer than 13 Assads, their gazes all pointing in different directions like a cluster of security cameras.

And his proxies were always present on our trip.



Images of President Bashar al-Assad filled the Old City of Damascus. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

The Syrian government has barred many of our New York Times colleagues and other news media outlets for reporting that it considers overly critical, and it had taken the three of us — me, a correspondent based in Beirut; my Lebanese interpreter; and an American photographer, Meridith Kohut — nearly half a year to obtain entry.

But a visa didn't mean permission to roam freely.

Almost everywhere we went, we were chaperoned by government minders, several soldiers and armed plainclothes agents from Syria's powerful intelligence apparatus. Occasionally introducing themselves as "journalists," the agents would stand next to us during nearly every conversation with a Syrian. If it was hard for us to talk to people, it was scary for them.

At best, we got a narrow, loyalist's-eye view of Syria: No one we spoke to blamed the Assad government for the catastrophe that had consumed Syria. Economic collapse was always the fault of American sanctions, not the war or corruption.

'We All Have the Same Sad Stories'

The minders were eager to show us that life was returning to normal. This was simple enough in Damascus, which had largely avoided physical damage.

Two minutes into our drive from Damascus to Douma, however, the scene outside our car window switched abruptly from a city in motion to a field of inert gray rubble. It seemed to go on for miles, the cigarette ash of the war: apartment buildings that resembled open-air parking garages, doorways spewing gray dust, minarets sticking askew out of the wreckage like half-melted candles in a cake.

The destruction had a bleak sameness to it, the warplanes and artillery having obliterated all but a few fingerholds of humanity. It made it easy to forget that this hadn't always been rubble — that these had once been homes.

In Douma, the downtown souk had a slow-but-steady trickle of customers looking for fruit and cut-rate housewares. But more than a year after the government broke the rebel hold there with a siege that reduced people to eating grass, much of the city remained nearly uninhabitable.

You could tell where people had started moving back in, essentially camping amid hills of rubble, by the dirty tarps that served as walls for apartments that no longer had them.

On one block, blackened chandeliers visible through huge gashes in one building mutely testified to Douma's broken middle class. One of the children playing outside led us upstairs to meet her grandparents, Ali Hamoud Tohme and his wife, Um Fares. (In Arab tradition, many women are known as "Um," or "mother of" their eldest son, while men often go by "Abu," or "father of." Most people were cautious about giving us their full names.)

Ali Hamoud Tohme and his wife, Um Fares, in their bedroom in Douma. They spent most of the war in a basement on the other side of town. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

A man selling watermelon in front of buildings destroyed by government forces in eastern Aleppo. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

The grandparents had returned to their apartment in May, finding it looted and burned. The one piece of furnishing they'd managed to save was a burgundy-and-blue rug that Um Fares took with her when they fled to a basement on the other side of town in the early days of the war. For all the seven years they'd lived underground, sometimes going days at a time without food or water, she had refused to unroll it, awaiting the day they came home again.

By the time they returned, 20 family members had died. She and her husband were raising 11 orphaned grandchildren in a largely abandoned building.

As for the few friends and neighbors who remained, "we avoid seeing each other," she said, "because we all have the same sad stories."

Her grandson Khaled, 9, sat alternately wiping his watery eyes and burying his face in a cushion. He wasn't crying for his dead father, Um Fares said. Khaled worked at a blacksmith's, making about a sandwich's worth of wages a day. The sparks and chemicals irritated his eyes.

Medication was unaffordable. But without his job, so was food.

Mr. Tohme rose and came back with a small glass plate of date- and nut-stuffed pastries. The Syrians we met always offered us something, no matter how little they had. Here in the Tohmes' living room, it felt ungrateful to refuse.

Ms. Kohut, our photographer, later told me she had seen him dig through piles of belongings in a wardrobe and unearth something from the bottom: the sweets, from their last, carefully hoarded box.

We said our goodbyes out on the pulverized street, with Mr. Tohme looking around at what used to be, and somehow still was, his home.

"This is the best area," he said, "in all of Douma."

'It Was Our Honor to Sacrifice Him'

Our government handlers multiplied when we drove to the coastal region of Latakia. Packed with Mr. Assad's fellow Alawite Muslims, a formerly marginalized religious minority whose members stock the army and security services, this was the president's stronghold.

In the mountain village of Beit Yashout, portraits of young men who had died fighting for Mr. Assad — the "martyrs" — gazed down from the telephone poles.

An entourage that included a military general, a village official and two veterans' affairs officials ushered us from house to house.

I asked one father of a dead soldier, Yassin Hassna, about his sacrifice — whether it had been worth it.

"Anything for Syria's sake," he said, his eyes flicking toward the general, who nodded approvingly. "I hope we all become martyrs for the country."

A mother, Zakiya Ahmad Hassan, showed us the plastic chair where she often sat next to her son's stone tomb, drinking coffee and singing to him. "It was our honor to sacrifice him," she said. "He was defending the country."

Zakiya Ahmad Hassan buried her son, Firas Mahmoud Ismail, in the backyard of their family home. She often sits by his grave and sings to him. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

Portraits of men who died fighting for Mr. al-Assad's government lining a street in Latakia, a stronghold of the Syrian president. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

Many non-Alawites assume the Alawites have been richly rewarded for their loyalty. But these families were barely getting by. They spoke of being unable to afford milk or baby formula, of the soaring cost of potatoes, oil and sugar. They had stopped going to the butcher.

Ms. Hassan swept a hand across the vegetables she was growing near her son's grave. "Even if the Americans sanction us, at least we can eat cucumbers and bread!" she said.

The provincial governor, Ibrahim Kohdr al-Salem, was eager to stress that the government was devoting more resources to veterans' families. They were supposed to get priority for government jobs, along with small perks like waived car taxes and university fees.

"Mr. President is personally prioritizing these issues," Mr. al-Salem said. "Every single day, he and the government follow up to check on the families of the martyrs."

Three government cameramen filmed our interview until the governor had exhausted all his lines.

In Aleppo, Busy Days With Nights Bereft of Light

On the drive north to Aleppo, burned-out vehicles lay upside-down on the side of the road, and gray-brown smoke swirled in the distance from one of the fires that had recently burned thousands of acres of crops. No one seemed to know who was responsible, only that Syria's hunger pangs seemed destined to grow worse.

Before the war, Aleppo was Damascus's greatest rival, the country's biggest city and its commercial engine. According to Rana, our minder, its people never slept. Or never used to: The government siege had splintered its 14th-century souk and, in much of the city, extinguished the lights.

Two and a half years after what everyone we met called the liberation of rebel-held eastern Aleppo, electricity still came primarily from generators. Without government reconstruction funds, rebuilding depended on the depths of individual pockets. There were people who couldn't afford doors or windows, people living with so little electricity they just sat outside every night until bedtime.

Only private hospitals had started to function again, perhaps because the government had repeatedly bombed hospitals and the public ones were still in ruins.

Yet by daylight, the area was busy with watermelon hawkers and traffic. A woman we met in a salon told us she was getting her first professional haircut since the war began. Schools had reopened.

Residential buildings destroyed during the war by government forces in eastern Aleppo. Without government reconstruction funds, rebuilding depends on the depths of individual pockets.
Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

Workers rebuilding the historic souk in Aleppo. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

"Safety is back in Syria," proclaimed one billboard.

But safety had proved elusive for Um Ahmad, 28, who was sitting on her stoop with her sister at dusk, surrounded by shattered buildings.

Their husbands were both missing, the two women said, detained as pro-government forces advanced on east Aleppo in 2015.

Our minds had been drawing closer, and at this they pounced. Rana, who never gave her last name, told Um Ahmad that it was more complicated than she was letting on. She shouldn't be saying these things to journalists.

"Should we lie? That's what happened," Um Ahmad said. At this, Rana led her into the kitchen, where I could hear raised voices. She was quiet when she came back.

Later, I complained to the information minister about the profusion of chaperones.

You have to understand, he said. We're not American. We do it differently. And everyone here assumes you're spies.

When it was time to leave Syria, military-intelligence escorts accompanied us to the Lebanese border. We had to pull over four times on the highway because their car kept breaking down; apparently, car maintenance wasn't in the budget. Every time they tried to get back on the road, the trunk of their scratched-up black sedan would pop open again with impeccable slapstick timing.

It was the first time any of them had veered off script all week.

Even After 8 Years of War, Still the Best

What does victory look like? At least half a million dead, more than 11 million severed from their homes. Rubble for cities, ghosts for neighbors. Shopping malls for some, homegrown cucumbers for others.

Most people we met watched what they said, closing their lips against talk of the past or future, their heads bent in the daily task of survival. Yet every so often, something reminded us that Syria was more than its war, however long, however terrible it has been.

At dinnertime our first night in Aleppo, our driver, Abu Abdo, said he knew a few places to eat near our hotel from his prewar days taking tourists to the city.

Waiting in a line to buy pita bread in Aleppo. More than eight in 10 people are now living in poverty, making less than \$3.10 a day per person. Meredith Kohut for The New York Times

The Citadel, a medieval fortress, at sunset in Aleppo, where electricity is intermittent.
Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

The first restaurant he remembered was gone. So was the second.

Halfway down the next block, a man stood in the lone lit doorway next to a sign that said "Resto Abonawas." Abu Abdo rushed toward him.

"Mr. Mahmoud, do you remember me?" he asked. "I used to come here all the time. You had the best food, the best."

The owner, Abdel Ghani Mahmoud, didn't recognize him at first. But then, a sudden brightening: "Oh yes," he said. "Yes."

The restaurant was empty except for a stooped chef in a corner. Our tablecloth was smudged; so were the murals of old Aleppo on the walls. A few flies did laps around the dining area. The only thing that didn't look several decades past its prime was the table heaped with fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes and mint.

When Abu Abdo asked for a drink with ice, Mr. Mahmoud apologized: The generator powering the refrigerator was broken, so, no ice. I glanced at my interpreter: Were we really going to eat meat here?

First came the vegetables. Then hummus and moutabbal, a smoky eggplant dip. Then several platters of spiced barbecued chicken and lamb kebab.

I started eating and immediately forgot about refrigeration. I'd had these dishes many times before, in Lebanon and now in Syria. These were the best.

"It's the same," Abu Abdo said. "The same as I remember."

When we left, the street was dark and empty. It was still early, but it had been many years since Aleppans stayed out all night.

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