Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
Syria's Decade of Tragedy

Guests:
Omar Alshogre
Ibrahim (Madiq Castle)
Zaina Erhaim
Ibrahim (Madaya)
Wafiqa

March 23, 2021

Jon Alterman:
March 2021 marks ten years since peaceful political protests rocked Syria and spurred a violent response that has absorbed the country ever since. To mark that occasion, we wanted to bring you Syrians' own stories, in their own words. Three of the people you'll hear from today have since left Syria, but two remain. Their lives have changed unimaginably since March 2011.

This is a special edition of *Babel: Translating the Middle East,* from the CSIS Middle East Program. I'm your host, Jon Alterman. A warning to our listeners: some of what you'll hear today is graphic, and much of it is heartbreaking.

Omar Alshogre:
I grew up safe in a beautiful hometown on the Syrian coast. I never imagined what's happening in Syria would happen.

Jon Alterman:
This is Omar Alshogre. He's 25 now, but he was 15 when the Arab Spring began and just 15 when he was imprisoned for the first time. He's now living in Washington, DC, and attending Georgetown University.

Omar Alshogre:
I had eight siblings and a father and a mother, both worked, and a typical life that everybody else in Syria would have. My father was an officer, that was an extra thing, where my father's way of treating us was kind of being as a soldier at home, and you receive all the love from your mother, and your father is the one to provide you with what you need to be a successful man. So that was my childhood. I had one specific friend I loved the most, who I spent most of my time with. And in the end of the story, I'm going to be telling more about him.

Jon Alterman:
Next, you'll hear from Ibrahim, from Madiq Castle, in western Syria. He stayed in Madiq Castle until 2019, when he was forced to leave for northern Syria, where he now lives.

Ibrahim (Madiq Castle):
Madiq Castle is indeed special to me; I was born and raised there. The people of Madiq Castle are kind and caring, and the city itself has always been a melting pot of different religions. For years, Muslims, Christians, and other religions and sects lived together in harmony, there were even several cases of inter-sectarian and interfaith marriages among Muslims, and even between Muslims and Christians. Such an environment taught me love, peace, and everything in between.

Omar Alshogre:
I remember that when I was in my first march, they took us from schools. I was 10 years old or so, and they took me from my school and said, "okay, now we're going to go to the street and say, 'We're going to sacrifice ourselves for the president.'" I went back home, and I hadn't seen the president so many times before that on TV—I watched children's programs—and I saw so many pictures of him that day. I went back home, and I said to my father, surprisingly, saying, "Oh, I noticed the president has very big ears, like a monkey." Just imagine how hard the slap came on my face, and I fell on the ground. I didn't know if I should cry or not, because I didn't understand what happened. Why is that? I said nothing, I've done nothing. I behaved very well,

> ***"You see the wall, see the doors, see the ceiling, everything around you, under you, above, all of that? Everything hears you and whatever you say about the***

what is the problem? And my father, who was usually a very strong, brave man comes and whispers to me. My father was whispering to me. The strong man I know is afraid of something. He comes and whispers to me and says, "You see the walls, see the doors, see the ceiling, everything around you, under you, above, all of that? Everything hears you and whatever you say about the president, if it's not beautiful, they can go while you're asleep to the president and his friends and tell them what you said about them. Never say that again."

I was a child so what happened is when I sleep, I just opened my eyes to see if the door was moving. I was pretend sleeping, then I opened my eyes to see if the ceiling was moving, if anything was going to tell the president about what I did that day. Because I believed what my father told me at the time was true. I did not get the message of that immediately; it took me a few years to understand what my father meant. It took me some time to grow up and understand what the metaphor would mean.

They were afraid. And I was not at that time. I learned to be afraid from the government, from the people around me. Everybody could be a spy. I learned that when I was 15 years old, when I ended up in a prison for the first time, being tortured for the first time.

Jon Alterman:
Zaina Erhaim is an award-winning journalist and activist who left Syria in 2015.

Zaina Erhaim:
To be frank, when I decided to study journalism, I didn't have an idea about what independent media was. I was just fascinated by this world where you can actually say something about people. I always loved storytelling. For me, that was the compelling part: listening to people and the interaction. I was focusing on the areas which the regime was giving a margin of freedom at that time. I was speaking about women, because they always underestimated women issues; they don't consider them as part of an uprising or a resistance. So, okay, you're fine, speak about women, whatever you want. But then I wrote something—a blog, actually, not even a piece—about fear and how we are raised to be afraid of everything, of every man, of our neighbor, of informers. And that's when I got the first call to be interrogated at the security forces.

> ***"I wrote something about fear and how we are raised to be afraid of everything. And that's when I got the first call to be interrogated at the security forces."***

I lived all my life in fear. I've never been fearless in my life. I'm 36 years old now. We were raised to be afraid of our parents, socially, and traditionally of our neighbors because they might be informers, or they might just tell lies about us, and we might be causing our parents to be arrested.

Narrator:
Ibrahim is from Madaya, a small town near Damascus, that was under siege from 2015-2017.

Ibrahim (Madaya):
In the beginning, I had many fears. First was the fear of airstrikes. I lived with my brother. And my brother's house was near a checkpoint. So we were always afraid. We were afraid that maybe the opposition forces will come and attack the checkpoint and we would get hit. Or maybe the regime soldiers at the checkpoint might go for an attack and then we would also get hit. This was the main fear.

> ***"If I ran out of the colostomy bags, what could I do? I thought maybe I would tie a plastic shopping bag to my abdomen."***

And then I had an IV line because I was recovering from the operation after I was shot in my abdomen. I couldn't eat, all I had was the IV serum. I was scared to run out of serum. If I ran out of the serum, I wouldn't have anything else, I wouldn't have anything to substitute it with. And then I was worried about my colostomy bags. If I ran out of the colostomy bags, what would I do? I thought maybe I would tie a plastic shopping bag to my abdomen—anything just to get by.

One of my fears was mortar shells. And, unfortunately, my brother was killed by a mortar shell. And then I got hit again by shrapnel. But, alhamdulillah, my injuries were minor. Some shrapnel hit my head, my shoulder, my leg, and my hand. And then I was treated, and everything was okay.

And then after I recovered from my operation, I could eat again. But we were always worried about not finding food. Anything we found that was edible, we ate it. There were some people who befriended the checkpoint guards and got food from them, but it always expensive. Any day we had food, we were always worried about the next day's food. This fear was always present. After I ate something I never knew if there would be a next meal. No one knew.

Omar Alshogre:
My father was aware of the brutality of the regime.

Jon Alterman:
This is Omar again.

Omar Alshogre:
He experienced that before the war started. My father to become an officer you were a soldier, and sometimes you made mistakes and they hit you, they put you in pain. Himself becoming an officer, he was in a position to hit some officers sometimes, punish them on this and this and this, to prove his strength and position as an officer. He grew up with that. He joined the army at a young age, and he spent 25 years in the army. He saw all the corruption. When the revolution has started in Egypt, watching the news, my father was looking at the news, between smiling and hiding, and just whispering with me saying, "Do you think we're going to have something like that here?" I did not answer this question because my father himself answered this question saying, "No, no, never, never, never, nothing would happen here." Because he was afraid, even talking to himself, about a revolution starting in Syria.

Zaina Erhaim:
Only in 2011, I knew that some of my family members were killed in the eighties by the regime because all my life, when older people would speak about such events, they would kick us out because they're scared that we might leak some information at school, and they will be arrested as a consequence.

Jon Alterman:
This is Zaina again, the journalist.

Zaina Erhaim:
So even our own families, in news and information, there was a source of fear. I think stepping away from that and being able to see things—and certainly studying at university and in mixed society, and I was active with the Red Cross and I started volunteering in different issues—I think that widened my horizons. And then I even started participating in international events for youth civil society. That also brought me in trouble with the government again.

Omar Alshogre:
And when it started, the first demonstration in my hometown, March 18, 2011, I told my father, I want to go to the demonstration, because my father was a person that you need permission from to do whatever you want to do. I told him, “I need to go to the demonstration.” He said, “no.” Five minutes later, I can hear my father just started his motorcycle. And he said, "Omar, come." I sit behind my father and he drives me to the demonstration. Before I jumped off the motorcycle he said, "Look, kid, a million people may die. Hide your face. Don't be stupid. Don't be foolish. Just hide your face and join those people."

Zaina Erhaim:
After the interrogation and them arresting my friend, I was also working for a local website that has a server in the U.S. So, suddenly I found myself accessing all the blocked websites. I started reading about what is happening and things that I've never heard of, like Rabia Dimashq, Damascus Spring, like opposition figures in prison, like human rights defender lawyers who are being interrogated, banned from traveling. So, that was my window to the world. I was so scared; I was deleting all the cookies and all the history after reading this. So, it was a combination of being able to access this reading, my friend being arrested. At that point, I realized we do live in a dictatorship, and I found my path in just playing on this margin of freedom that's related to gender equity. And I stayed on that margin until the uprising started.

> ***“Suddenly, I found myself accessing all the blocked websites. I started reading about what was happening and things I’d never heard of… I realized we do live in a dictatorship.”***

Omar Alshogre:
There were 30,000 or 40,000 people on the streets, so hiding your face, is that necessary? I questioned what he said. I jumped off and I joined the demonstration and I saw my father driving away. He did not join the demonstrations. He had a plan, something in his head, and I joined the demonstration and I was jumping with people, dancing, singing about freedom. Did I really understand what freedom meant when I was 15 years old? No, I didn't care. I didn't understand what freedom meant because I felt I never experienced the opposite of freedom, so I didn't know when joining the demonstration, but I would understand that a few hours later when I saw the guns in my head, and they are shooting people around me, and my friend Alaa was dying next to me. And I saw blood for the first time and people trying to run. And they fell on the ground for some reason, there were so many shootings happening around me.

And I had this picture. Police are, and the security service are, like my father. They may be tough, but they are not horrible. Then I saw them killing people who were innocent, like my friend, who I know who he is, next to me, dying. There was something wrong going on. Police killing people, the police are bad.

Jon Alterman:
Ibrahim from Madaya again:

Ibrahim (Madaya):
After the first protest, the country became divided between several factions: opponents of the regime, supporters of the regime, and those who stayed in the middle. And in time, such division became deeper, and the pro-regime side started informing on the anti-regime side. The people were torn between those who wanted to raise their voices in support of the protests and those who were determined to silence those voices. Then as the demonstrations intensified and people got excited by the momentum, more people wanted

to join in. The tensions started to grow and then the barricades and checkpoints started to appear.

Jon Alterman:
Here is Ibrahim from Madiq Castle again, describing how the regime attacked his hometown:

Ibrahim (Madiq Castle):
Madiq Castle, my city, was attacked by the regime forces five times: twice in 2011, twice in 2012, and one last time in 2019, when we were forced to leave the city. But it was different in the beginning. You know, in the beginning, the regime used to prepare for ground offensives by bombing specific targets in the town. Once the regime is done with burning down the town and destroying its infrastructure, we would go back to our homes. I remember during the first ground offensive on September 6, 2011, the regime carried out massive detention and looting campaigns for 15 to 20 days, then they withdrew, and we returned to our homes. But later on, it became different. They were no longer targeting specific areas. Instead, they used to bomb the entire town in a random way. The fourth attack was the most terrifying, that was on August 27, 2012. They burned down dissidents' houses and detained their families.

> ***"In the beginning, the regime used to prepare for ground offensives by bombing specific targets in the town… Later on, it became different. They used to bomb the entire town in a random way."***

Jon Alterman:
Ibrahim from Madaya was shot in the abdomen on the first day of the siege:

Ibrahim (Madaya):
There was no medicine, there was no place to find any treatment. The operation to extract the bullet was done by a veterinary doctor, a nurse, and an anesthesia technician. Granted, this was under the supervision of a medical doctor, but the doctor was too old. The entire situation was bad. The only anesthesia available was expired. I was awake the entire operation because the anesthesia was expired. It was horrible, and it was all because of the siege. I also lost 25 kilos during the siege. On one hand, I had my own health situation, and on the other hand, there was the food shortage.

A lot changed with the siege. For example, before the siege, we used to eat three times a day. During the siege, we would only eat twice. And these two meals—we would eat anything we could get our hands on. I remember one time, there was this jar, a jar of jam on the roof of the house. We had put it there a year before and then forgotten about it. The color of it was black and the jam was dried and hard. We hit it with a knife to get the jam out of the jar. There was nothing else. We wanted to eat. We wanted to eat, so we ate it. We ate it and we cursed Bashar and we cursed his regime.

Jon Alterman:
Wafiqa was a teacher in a town close to Damascus but was forcibly displaced in April 2016. Now she lives in Idlib.

Wafiqa:
In the beginning of the revolution and the war, we all suffered together. When a plane came and there were noises everywhere, none of us knew what to do. It was very difficult, as students didn't know what to do or where to go, and neither did we. Over time, we all adapted and learned what we should do. We could tell students that certain places were better than others and which ones were best. They got a better idea of how to hide during strikes, and we didn't have to tell them as much about how to protect themselves. Now they follow the news,

> ***"Last year, when we were in Idlib, there was a war, a big offensive. My kids, Sara and Youssef, and I didn't know what to do. What could I say? We worry about our kids, of course. But we have thick skin. We're used to it."***

and they just stay home when there is a big attack.

Last year when we were in Idlib, there was a war, a big offensive. My kids, Sara and Youssef, and I didn't know what to do. What can I say? We worry about our kids, of course. But we have thick skin; we're used to it. Of course, they're afraid, but you have to tell them not to worry. We used to hide in safe areas, we got used to doing things like that. The children are most terrified of the sound of airplanes. When they were younger, they didn't know what they were. But now my son Youssef runs to me and hugs me during attacks, and there he'd feel safe.

Jon Alterman:
Here, Omar describes his own experiences going to school while being targeted by the regime:

Omar Alshogre:
One time I was arrested from my classroom. So, they attacked the classroom, I'm sitting, we had a math lesson, and they attacked, and they took me from my seat. They put me on the ground, they tortured me in front of my friends, my classmates, and the teacher was hiding in the corner. He didn't want to look at us, because he felt ashamed of not being able to do anything. My classmates were in the other corner, they are between crying and screaming, and other ones were silent, so they were not targeted by the police. They just wanted some blood to come out of me, so they kept the blood on the floor, and they ordered the teacher, this blood on the floor should not be removed or cleaned. And they took me to prison. And I was released later because my father paid money and get me out, and we had a discussion on our way home.

It wasn't the first time I was arrested, but it was the first time my father asks me about how they tortured me. The first time he asked me details about why they arrested you. "You think there is a reason why they chose you right from the classroom, not your other friends, why you?" And "what did they do to you in prison?" And we talked about that. I told him, for the first time, details. My father and I were not close before 2011, 2012, we were not close. And the first time having a real conversation with my father about serious things was a big deal for me. It meant a lot.

Sharing with him this experience of pain was not what I expected myself to talk to my father about, because he was a tough officer. He wanted me to be a strong man and talking to him about pain was not exactly what he, maybe, expected a year ago to hear from me. And he ordered me—I would say—later to move out. I moved and I hid for a while. Hiding did not really work because you have to go and buy food. You got to go to school or whatever. And the regime is everywhere. They follow everybody. You feel them everywhere, especially on the coast, everybody is a regime, not because you—they can't force my father to be a spy because, okay, if you don't spy on other people, including your kids, we can take you, we can torture you. We can kill your wife, your kids, we can stop your business. They have unlimited power.

Jon Alterman:
Ibrahim from Madiq:

Ibrahim (Madiq Castle):
In 2015, they bombed the entire town for three months. I was truly terrified, and it was my first time to think about running away

from my hometown. During that campaign, the regime changed its bombing strategy; instead of targeting the militias' camps, they bombed the entire city randomly, destroying schools, hospitals, houses, and everything. They targeted residential areas and schools with barrel bombs. Just the sound of these barrels exploding is terrifying. It makes you feel that the barrel will explode over your head. And I was worried—I was worried about my wife and my two daughters. That time, we decided to leave the town, and we actually tried. However, on our way out, a barrel hit the ground 50 meters away from us. It was a horrible moment. We decided to go back home and hide in the surrounding farm mills. I can say that in 2015 I thought about leaving but I could not do it.

Zaina Erhaim:
I think with the regime, unless you are arrested, the killing in the opposition-held areas was pretty much indiscriminate. When I was asked by my organization, why I wasn't wearing the flak jackets and the helmet, I was like, I might be killed when I'm asleep. I most probably will be killed when I'm shopping for my groceries, because I don't go to front lines, and front lines are safer because you know who is shooting at you. But the indiscriminate barrel bombs and bombing is happening in inhabited civilian areas. The most dangerous for me—if you're living in an area controlled by the jihadists—is the assassination. And that eventually is what forced me to leave that area because they issued a blasphemy case against me. And I was looking behind me checking my car every single day.

> ***"I was too scared to publish what I was seeing and what I was documenting. So, I recorded that for history, for the future."***

And while I was in Northern Syria, I was recording my diaries and writings. And I even had a file, which is named, 'Not to be published,' because I was too scared to publish what I was seeing and what I was documenting. So, I recorded that for history, for the future. When those military winners are going to be sitting on the table, writing our own history and our own perspectives, they can be challenged with some facts that are documented by a journalist that has some credibility, who did it while living there.

Omar Alshogre:
I think the most important story to record is the personal story, about somebody you loved during this time in prison. I think what should be remembered the most are those important people who did not survive when they were in prison. We need to remember them as people, as brothers, sisters, siblings, friends, whatever they were. Remembering them as a human, not as numbers, because it's easy to talk about them. "50,000 people died under torture," you don't make them sound like they are human. They are just numbers.

Jon Alterman:
Ibrahim from Madiq, who lived through regime bombing of his town:

Ibrahim (Madiq Castle):
I want the world to know what happened and why. I want them to know how the international community—in the 21st century—let a tyrant destroy an entire country, displace 13 million of its people, and destroy its hospitals and schools. What did the international community do? What happened to the ideals of freedom and human rights? It is very obvious who is responsible for all of that, but still, no one wants to do anything about it. As if international laws do not apply to the regime in Syria. I just hope that no one, anywhere, would experience what is happening with us. I really hope that no one will be forced to give up their home, their freedom, and dignity, while others are

watching. I just hope that no one would ever feel that pain.

Omar Alshogre:
The one that I want to highlight is my cousin Bashir, who I loved the most among everybody I met before the revolution and the guy who I loved the most during my time in prison as we were arrested together the last time. We were arrested together—four cousins together—me, Bashir, and his two siblings, Rashaad and Noor. We ended up in prison and four months later we lose the first one, Rashaad. And then Bashir got sick, and I started carrying Bashir to the bathroom because he could not walk to the bathroom, and you're not talking about a bathroom that you just go to. The way to the bathroom was 35 meters and you have guards to the right, to the left, they torture you. So, carrying somebody to the bathroom wasn't easy because you may die. And every day when you carry someone to the bathroom, you may die, and you ask yourself: "is it worth it to endanger my own life and my cousin's life?" Isn't my cousin going to die because he is already sick, and he cannot be sick in prison because you're being tortured and starved for a while. Any sickness you get will break you and you will die. Is it worth the investment?

I believed it was. I knew Bashir would die. I had no doubt about that, but I believed if I helped Bashir, my humanity would survive. My will to survive would survive. I carried Bashir every day and when I came back to the room, other prisoners would look at me with a smile on their face, telling me, "there is so much hope in the actions you're doing, Omar." And I get back carrying and looking at Bashir's eyes, he was always smiling. A smiling man despite the pain. He had so big a scar on his back, there was a wide scar. There were maggots. There were maggots eating his body and there was blood all the time, in pain all the time, but he always had a smile. Bashir always had a smile on his face not because he was happy or not because he wanted to be smiling. The only thing was because he felt a personal responsibility to his cellmates to give them hope.

> ***"I knew Bashir would die. I had no doubt about that, but I believed if I helped Bashir, my humanity would survive."***

And he could only deliver this hope through a smile. There was nothing else he could do. People are naked, tortured, bloody everywhere, and you sit in the corner, everybody's depressed if you look at those prisoners, everybody's sad, people are crying, and want to kill themselves, because they can't bear this torture anymore. So, I wanted to protect him for the smile he had. And because I wanted him, because I didn't want to be alone. I wanted him to be alive. And I fought for him to be alive for me to survive. Alone you can't because if they break your leg, you can't walk. You need somebody to take care of you when you go to the bathroom or give you your food, because your food won't come to your hand. You got to fight to get your food to be in your hand.

The last time came. I'm carrying him to the bathroom, and he is in the bathroom and he is just whispering to me because we were not allowed to speak each other in prison, we were not even allowed to whisper but we whispered when we knew the guard is not listening to us. The guards, definitely, when they saw me carrying my cousin to the bathroom, they knew we were related that's why they tortured us more than other people. They focused on us to break this relationship, to show all the prisoners that here, nobody can care about somebody else. Everybody will be on their own and they will die on their own.

And Bashir whispering, saying, "Omar, I can't breathe anymore." And I opened the door, grabbed Bashir running back with him and always I had other prisoners around me who cared about me and Bashir. They always walked behind me or in front of me just to give me some protection. So, the guard is hitting me, somebody will jump over my body a little bit, so they guard their head. So, I rest a little bit. And one of them behind me was knocking my shoulder while I was walking and say, "Omar stop, stop, stop. Don't walk anymore." And I could not just turn around, but he really turned me around. And he said, "Stop walking, look at your cousin." In my arms, "Look at your cousin. He is dead."

And I look at my cousin Bashir and he's in my arms and he is asleep. And when you don't want to accept something, you don't. I shook my right arm where his head was lying. And I said, "Bashir, wake up." Whispering I'm saying, "Bashir, wake up. It's just not time to sleep. It's just not the perfect time for that because there is a guard torturing us over our heads. You've got to wake up, you've got to help me carry you." And I start to feel Bashir is becoming much heavier to carry. And I can't balance myself anymore. And we fall both on the ground and I start to hit his face and I'm getting hit sometimes. Then I'm protected from other prisoners, then I'm getting hit again. And I'm seeing the blood coming from my nose on Bashir's face and I hit him on his face, saying, "Bashir, wake up. You can't sleep right now." It's a very frustrating situation, and I hit him on his face, hit him stronger. And he never woke up. Bashir left.

He died and I become alone in prison, on my own. I got to make it on my own, or I'm going to die on my own, which is the more likely to happen is that I am going to die on my own, because if I had little, little hope, I had it because I had Bashir with me. Bashir left. I had nothing to live for because in addition to Rashaad, Bashir and Noor, then they arrested a new cousin Hassan who died with us, but he also brought me news that my family was killed in a massacre in my village. What did I have to go out to, to be free to, if my family was killed, my school was bombed, and my childhood friends were dead? I have nothing outside. I knew more people in prison than what I knew outside of prison. Should I go out? For what? I have nothing.

"What did I have to go out [of prison] to, to be free to, if my family was killed, my school was bombed, and my childhood friends

And I start to notice people caring about me. The doctor, who was a prisoner next to me telling me how to take care of my wounds. The psychologist, a prisoner on the other side of me telling me how to enjoy the last moments or how to make the best of your time in prison, and the lawyer in front of me, talking to me about how to build a dictator free prison, and a teacher, how to use all the knowledge around us to build a school, how to build circles that can educate us. Seeing all those highly educated prisoners around they gave me hope, and we started to plan on something.

We want to educate ourselves. I was the youngest prisoner. Everybody starts to build their legacy in me by teaching me what they knew, what they learned in their schools or in professional life. And they taught me all of that and they died. People around you—they die all the time, but you get some new prisoners. And those new prisoners, we started to get younger prisoners and all the legacy, all the education I received from the other prisoners, I start to teach those young ones. And we were in prison.

We were in pain. But you always want to have fun. You always try to have a fun moment. I was supposed to be in high school. So, we call this the circles of whispers, whatever, we call them school. It's a school time.

I will sit and whisper with you about how to take care of wounds. And when I turned 19, we decided this going to be a university because I am in the age of university, I should be in university. And we start to call it the university of whispers because we wanted to feel normal. Just normal. Because we did not have that. We were in pain; we were in a unique situation of suffering. So, we want to have something normal. We didn't want to come back from the tortured chamber and sit in our room thinking about the torture. We want to think about something else. So, we want to think about our education in this cells and we called it the university of whispers.

Zaina Erhaim:
I think I am a naive person. I got surprised so many times in the last 10 years with the first time coming into the road, seeing the first sniper, losing the first friend under torture, witnessing the first barrel bomb, seeing the fighter jets. I was surprised—could be because of my hopes. It could be because I wouldn't have expected that some people are capable of being such devils with their own people.

Ibrahim (Madaya):
I know this is cliché or even a bit cheesy--but Syria really is a beautiful country. We all lived together, people of different races and different religions, everyone lived together in harmony. Sadly, it was our government that could not deal with the situation properly. Syria was a beautiful country. It was a safe country and we had good lives, but now it is ruined. People keep saying it is a war. This is not a war. This is a revolution, a revolution for basic rights; all we asked for is equality and freedom.
I hope people don't use the word "war." I hope they use the word "revolution," because it will remain a revolution, inshallah.

"This is not a war. This is a revolution, a revolution for basic rights. All we asked for is equality and freedom."

Ibrahim (Madiq Castle):
We left Madiq Castle for the unknown. We were lost. I am really worried about being permanently displaced. I am worried that we might end up like the Palestinians, and we would never be able to go back to our homes. I do not think about staying here, I only think about going home.

Omar Alshogre:
I never imagined to see what I saw. You've seen a lot from movies where a father would sacrifice himself for his kids. It's in a lot of movies where a mother would do whatever to save to their children, the one they love. A lot of movies where the guy or the girl would die to save the one they love's life. That is fake in most of the cases, that is not true. I saw a father killing his son to eat his bread. So, when you are in need, you will do whatever, because you're not the same when you are now. And especially in Branch 215, where I spent one year and nine months, we ended up for a long time, not having the guard torturing us at all, but prisoners who were torturing us to get food, to get water, to have a shower. That was their reason to torture us. Because when you are in such a situation, it's not you. It's your survival mechanism in your head that breaks whatever you do. I don't know if you're responsible for that, actually, I don't know. That's like when I was hitting my cousin to force him to eat because he refused eat, because he believed he would come out of prison and face his mother telling her what? My brother and my sister died

at the torture and I could not do anything for them to save them? He could not face his mother with that.

Ibrahim (Madiq Castle):
Honestly, I never thought that I would leave Madiq. I always wanted to stay there even if that meant my death. And I always had hope that something was going to happen. During the final offensive, Turkish authorities kept saying that the Syrian army would not advance to the town. And I also kept telling myself that the international community would do something and would not allow the Syrian regime to capture the town. Until that day, when my mother woke me up, saying that the Syrian army did advance to the town, capture the historic castle itself, and that people were running away.

We were forced to leave in 2019. We stayed in Madiq Castle for four months under continuous bombing, and we left the city just 4 days before the regime captured it. But the special thing about this operation was the involvement of the Russian air forces. Because the Russians used to target markets, public highways, and other crowded areas, I saw people burning in front of my eyes, and I couldn't do anything. They also used "concussion bombs." You feel the bomb even if it was two kilometers away.

The truth is we used to leave it to Allah because there was not much to be done. The area where we used to live was not suitable for building shelters or trenches. I remember one night I could not fall asleep and kept counting the explosions. That day there were 460.

Omar Alshogre:
You can always find your reasons around the bad things you do. You can turn whatever bad you do to something you think good about. You always find your reasons to justify whatever you doing.

How I see humans is different. Someone's muscles won't impress me anymore because I had no muscles and I survived, and big men in prison died in one day. It's a lot about the mentality you build for yourself. That's your survival mechanism. It's not your strength, physical strength. And I don't know what to add about the uniqueness of a human beings. We can be what we want to be.

"How I see humans is different. Someone's muscles won't impress me anymore because I

Zaina Erhaim:
Certainly, I lost my belief in so many things and so many organizations. At one point in Damascus, I even volunteered with the UN, because I was happy thinking that there is something that can actually bring justice, or you can refer to. And as a non-religious person, I needed something to be seen in life. I didn't want to wait for the after-death judgment day to get my justice. So, I lost my belief in lots and lots of things.

Ibrahim (Madiq Castle):
Sometimes I wonder … maybe we are not humans, maybe we are just animals. How could the international community and the United Nations let that happen to us? People in the areas controlled by the regime are living under fear. They cannot raise their voices. Such regimes are the reason why terrorism and ISIS exist. The whole world betrayed us … they gave up on us … they let us down.

Since the eruption of the crisis in 2011 and until we were displaced in 2019, I never wanted to leave the city. It feels like I have left part of my soul there. But I still have hope. I am both hopeful and certain that tyranny will not last. That there will come a day when all these

criminals will be tried and punished for what they have done. I am both hopeful and certain that there will come a day when I will be back home in my town. And just thinking about Madiq Castle gives me patience and determination.

Jon Alterman:
This is Wafiqa again, the woman who is now teaching in Idlib.

Wafiqa:
Do I still have hope that things will get better? No, not really. Even without war and without shelling, economic conditions are dire. There's no money, and unemployment is terrible. I just hope there is less shelling and airstrikes.

> ***"Even without war and without shelling, economic conditions are dire. There's no money, and unemployment is terrible"***

Ibrahim (Madiq Castle):
The current state of division is a product of tyranny, injustice, and the war in general. But I am certain that when the Assad regime falls, the war will be over, the division will be healed, and everything will return to normal.

Ibrahim (Madaya):
I have this picture I took of a mountain in Madaya. I still have the picture, and I always pull it out and look at it. I remember the market, we had a beautiful market, and on Fridays and over the weekend, the market was really busy. I really miss the air, the water, and the fruits that we had. My town was famous for its apples, cherries, peaches. I've been in Turkey since 2016 and I still eat fruits, but they are tasteless. And I drink water…but it isn't like the water in Syria. It's not the same.