



(Re)viewing the Syrian War

Stories from a member of the Red Crescent

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November 28 - December 13, 2019

at the Curating and Public Scholarship Lab
1400 de Maisonneuve Blvd W., LB671.10
Tiohtià:ke/Montréal, QC

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Events

OPENING

Thursday November 28th, 5 - 7pm
(Catered by Les Filles Fattoush)

SYRIAN ART AS TRANSFORMATIVE ENERGY

Friday November 29th, 6 - 7pm
a presentation by Alma Salem (Curator and Cultural Advisor,
Founder of the Freedom Museum).

2 YEARS IN CANADA: A CONVERSATION ABOUT A SYRIAN-CANADIAN FRIENDSHIP

Wednesday December 4th, 6 - 7pm
hosted by Abood Hamad and Michael Keeling

(Re)Viewing the Syrian War has emerged in collaboration with the Beyond Museum Walls Curatorial Residency program, hosted at the Curating and Public Scholarship Lab.

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**CURATING
AND PUBLIC
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Canada

It's a very cold day, sorry about that. Have you seen snow before?

Did you live in a refugee camp before you came to Canada?

Would you prefer to live near a mosque?

What did Syria look like before the war?

Do Syrians spend most of their days in basements and shelters?

Has the armed opposition protected civilians in Syria?

Were all Syrian cities destroyed by the war?

Are ISIS fighters Syrian?

Are there really Syrians who support Bashar al-Assad?

Does your mother wear a hijab?

How can I help Syrians?

How did you spend your time in Syria during the war?

Did Syrians used to live in tents in the desert, like in the movies?

Have all Syrians converted to Islam?

Who is responsible for the displacement of civilians?

Can children still go to school?

What were you doing with the Red Crescent and other humanitarian organizations?

Is it appropriate for me to kiss your mother when I greet her?

Why did you leave Syria? Will you return someday?



Delivering food. SARC. Rural Damascus, 2012.

Since arriving in Canada I have often been asked about my experiences as a Syrian refugee and humanitarian aid worker. These questions made me realize that the North American media has distorted people's perceptions of the war and of Syria. I believe that these misconceptions negatively affect our ability to provide support to survivors.

(Re)Viewing the Syrian War addresses some of the questions I have been asked through personal stories and objects, alongside images and videos taken by colleagues, friends, and local observers. The core collection of images was made by Syrian and international photographers, many of whom I met while working for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). We each experienced the conflict differently, and each photographer worked in a different context – some for local media, some for personal art projects, some for humanitarian aid organizations – but all with a desire to document the complexities of life in Syria during the conflict. By framing their work with my own stories I hope to shed light on my experiences with SARC in Damascus, Homs, and other parts of the country, as well as after arriving in Montreal two years ago. Ultimately, my goal is to offer a glimpse of how everyday Syrians have lived and responded to the conflict with creativity and resilience.

The Syrian conflict is complex. What began as a clash between anti- and pro-government protestors devolved into a full-scale civil war, with intervention by foreign governments and jihadist militants. While the Syrian government has used violence against non-combatants, at times it has also protected civilian populations. And while many opposition

forces defend the rights of the people, these groups have also harmed the communities they claim to protect. There are heroes and villains on both sides, depending on the particular region and moment in the conflict.

My work focuses on the experiences of civilian victims, including humanitarian aid workers who provide assistance in the midst of war. (Re)viewing the Syrian War also encourages visitors to reflect on how they might help, particularly in the case of child survivors. The plight of Syrian children briefly caught the world's attention in 2015 with a photo of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while his family was seeking a peaceful place to live. The international community is deeply implicated in this war, so the future of Alan's generation is the world's responsibility. When military actions end, the work of repair will have just begun.

About the Curator

Before arriving in Canada Abood Hamad spent seven years (2009-2016) as a humanitarian aid worker in his home country of Syria. He served as a children's psycho-social support worker, a relief official, and a first-responder for civilian casualties. Hamad also trained hundreds of civilians and volunteers in first-aid for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. He was stationed in major conflict areas during the war, and had direct contact with the day-to-day reality of life in wartime. Hamad came to Montreal as a sponsored refugee in 2017.



Safety Check. Abood Hamad. Damascus, 2016.

The most dangerous country in the world

In 2009, according to the United Nations, Syria had a relatively low homicide rate, quite similar to Canada. This fact may seem unbelievable to some, given that 10 years later Syria ranked as the most dangerous country in the world.

Today in Damascus it is routine to check underneath your car before going to work in the morning to make sure no explosives have been placed there overnight.



Sheets line the devastated streets of Salah al-Din neighbourhood. Franco Pagett. Aleppo, Syria, 2013.

Fabric walls

From 2013 to 2015, opposition forces began to move deeper into the main cities. This was particularly evident in Aleppo, which was divided right down the middle into an opposition-held east and a government-controlled west. One of the biggest dangers for civilians in divided Aleppo were snipers positioned in tall buildings on both sides of the boundary line, who often made no distinction between civilians and combatants when shooting.

Over time and through daily experience, civilians were able to identify which streets and buildings were beyond the snipers' field of vision. Indeed, to create a bit more freedom of movement, they began to construct fabric walls to further obscure the snipers' lines of sight, so they could travel the streets with more safely.

Too many blankets

While working with the Red Crescent I was always surprised at how well Syrians were able to adapt to the brutalities of war.

Contrary to the images I've seen in the Western media showing people utterly paralyzed, waiting in their basements for the war to end, Syrians have created innovative solutions to the challenges imposed by the conflict, and reacted to them in innovative, constructive ways.

As a result of the poor coordination of international aid, humanitarian organizations often face a surplus of certain donated items and a scarcity of others. For example, sometimes there were too many blankets, but a shortage of children's clothing. In response, Abu Samir, a local tailor, used the fabric of donated blankets to sew children's coats.



Screenshot from "Too many blankets". SARC. Homs, 2015.



Selling cotton candy. Mohammed Badra. The official website of the Popular Will Party. Aleppo,



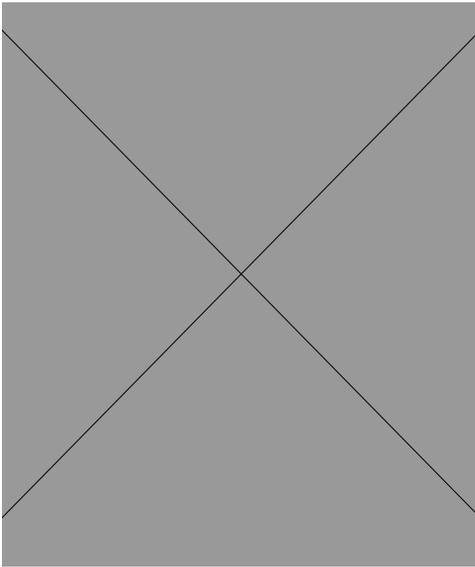
Investigating the destruction in Douma, Ghouta. Mohammed Badra. Official website of the Popular Will Party. Damascus, 2015.



Hanging laundry. Mohammed Badra. Official website of the Popular Will Party. Raqqa, 2017.



Selling fruit in eastern Ghouta. Mohammed Al-khatieb. Damascus, 2013.



Needs updated image

Marlboro pack

It may sound strange, but this Marlboro cigarette pack – one of the most expensive brands in the Middle East – is the reason I was able to get to Canada.

Although the distance between Damascus and Beirut is only 116 km, the road from Damascus to the Syrian-Lebanese border seemed very long to me. Dozens of questions went through my mind: Will they let me pass through the checkpoint? Do I have enough money to stay in Lebanon? How long will it be before I can get an interview at the Canadian Embassy? Will the Canadian government accept our request to emigrate? But my most pressing question in that moment was whether the Lebanese General Security would grant me permission to enter Lebanon.

It was 2016. The Lebanese government resented the large numbers of Syrians who continued to arrive in Lebanon, particularly after the Beirut airport became the only way to leave the area by plane. A successful crossing at the Lebanese border point would be dependent on the mood or prejudices of the security officer.

On my way to the border I began talking to my taxi driver, Abu Omar, about these fears and he instructed me to stop and buy a pack of Marlboro cigarettes. Few people could afford to smoke this expensive brand, and the plan was to go to the Lebanese border checkpoint holding the cigarette pack, along with an iPhone that Abu Omar would lend me. All of this would make it appear as though I were a rich tourist rather than a refugee.

At the border, the officer in charge looked at me as I gave him my documents with one hand and held the Marlboro pack and iPhone with the other. He agreed to give me permission to enter, no questions asked, though he had refused several people in front of me.

I decided to keep that cigarette pack. Without it, I would not be where I am now.

Leaving Syria

Despite the destruction, insecurity, and overall sense of scarcity, my work in humanitarian aid was fulfilling. I felt good every time someone I had trained in first aid called to tell me they had applied what they learned and managed to help someone. But day by day, as neighbourhoods were destroyed one by one, I increasingly felt that I did not belong here. It was no longer the place I had lived before the war, especially after all of my loved ones had left.

Every week we threw farewell parties. By the end of 2016, most of my friends were in Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East, and my sister and her husband had left for Sweden. Only my mother and I remained. Abu Omar, the taxi driver who orchestrated the Marlboro-iPhone plan, later became my friend while I was in Lebanon. He was the only person left to say goodbye to at the airport when I left for Canada.



Abood and Abu Omar
Abood Hamad
Lebanon, 2016

Acknowledgements

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Al Aan TV
Creative Commons Foundation
Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution
Google Earth
GOPA DERD Organization
Syrian Arab Red Crescent

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