

Damascus: Easter Week in a City Under Fire

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Though old as history itself, thou art fresh as the breath of spring, blooming as thine own rose bud, and fragrant as thine own orange flower, Damascus, pearl of the East.” -Mark Twain “The Innocents Abroad”

The first thing you notice while driving over Mount Lebanon is how close Beirut and Damascus are, and yet their respective situations could not be further apart.

Last month, the war on Syria entered its sixth year. However, thirty years ago, Lebanon was where Syria finds itself today – embroiled in a painful and protracted *not-so-civil* ‘civil war,’ with numerous regional and global powers angling for influence, each pressing for their own agenda.

There’s a noticeable difference once you pass from Lebanon into Syria – the highway is paved and smooth, concrete bollards are neatly arranged, and there are no manhole ditches to avoid in the middle of the road. Images of Bashar and his father Hafiz are prominently displayed along the Damascus Road.

As one would expect in a country at war, checkpoints are numerous and security is extremely tight along the rural highways, as well as in the city. Still, life goes on in the capital. Couples are walking, mothers are shopping, children playing and the restaurants are serving.

This is Easter week in Syria. In normal times, the week following Palm Sunday would see major processions and festivities, as families take off work and get together to celebrate over an extended weekend. That’s still happening, but with an air of caution. Church volunteers are still out displaying their Easter decorations, and you can hear the voice of choir hymns gently echoing through the narrow streets of the Old City. Even with the cloud of conflict looming over the city, the spiritual vibration is still undeniable.

This is my first time in Syria, so it’s more than a bit surreal to be having a morning tea while hearing shells exploding only one and a half kilometres away as fierce fighting continues between Syrian government forces and *Tahrir al Sham* (the latest incarnation in the endless rebranding campaign of Al Nusra Front, aka Al Qaeda in Syria) terrorists (dispensing with the west’s regime change pc lexicon, they are not rebels, they are terrorists) in Jobar.

Last night, we went to sleep with the sounds of artillery and mortars, and awoke by more of the same at about 4:00am. The shelling is loud enough that the bedroom wall vibrates, with a few seconds delay between the sound of firing and the impact. Later today, we’ll get updates and perhaps learn exactly what landed and where, or maybe not. Unfortunately, after 24 hours of continuous random shelling, it becomes background noise. But it also

serves as a pungent reminder that anyone's fortunes can change in a split second.

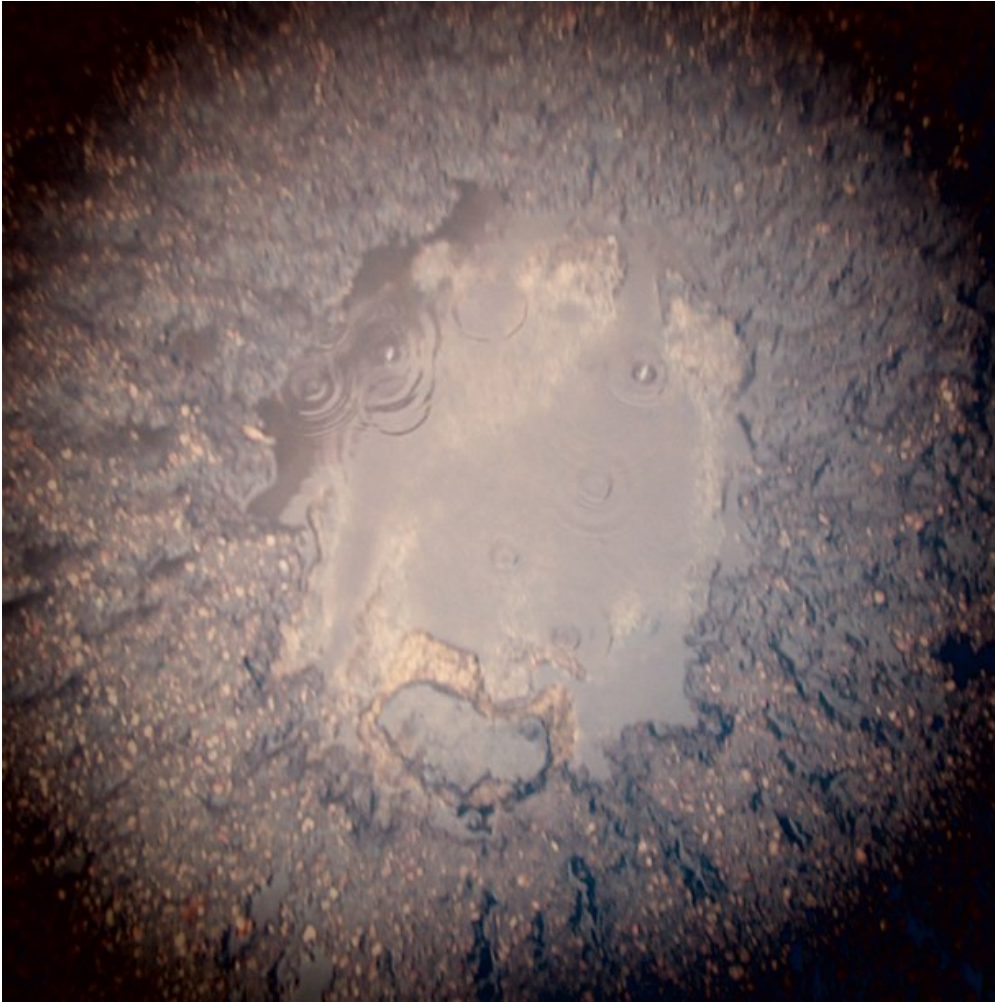
Some residents intimated that in comparison to 2012 and 2013, the last two years have seen a relative peace for Damascus residents, but that apparent lull in fighting ended last month. Certainly, the tension is palpable. The city is on high alert after intense fighting broke out in the Damascus district of Jobar, and in Quaboun, and in the suburb of Ghouta.

Over the last five weeks, the west's proxy column commonly known in US and UK media circles and by Senator John McCain, as "moderate rebels," unleashed what American analyst Andrew Korybko cannily [described last month](#) as a *Takfiri Tet Offensive*. Not surprisingly, the Syrian government forces' response to the Takfiri offensive in terrorist-occupied places like Jobar has been hard and swift. Syria is not like any other urban conflict. As in East Aleppo, terrorists in Jobar have been operating from a series of underground tunnels and bunkers which have been dug and developed over the last five years.

The purpose of this terrorist surge was twofold: to derail international peace talks, and to further destabilize previously stable areas, like Damascus, but also to try and stretch the Syrian Army's resources, in effect handicapping attempts to regain control of pivotal control lines like Deir ez Zor. Meanwhile, an increasingly motley international conclave continues to huddle around the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa in preparation for the big show.

In the same way that [Israeli airstrikes in Syria have coincided with al Nusra and ISIS movements](#) on the ground, the timing of this recent terrorist offensive in conjunction with US military operations should not be ignored either. The fact remains that terrorist militants continue to benefit from the US-led Coalition and Israeli sorties, including after the recent US Tomahawk missile strike on Shayrat Air Base in Syria ordered by President Trump. The US President claims the US was "talking out" Syria's 'chemical weapon facilities' in response to [the alleged chemical weapons incident](#) in Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province last week. In his infinite wisdom, what Trump really did was take out a Syrian air base which was responsible for roughly 75% of air sorties launched against ISIS. Like Obama before him, Trump's claim that Washington's illegal US operation in Syria is all about *fighting ISIS* - still rings as hollow as ever.

So it's not outrageous to say that there are no more coincidences in this war.



There are a number of 'moderate rebel' mortar strikes left in the pavement along a busy shopping thoroughfare in the Old City (Photo: Patrick Henningsen)

In the Old City, you can see where Al Nusra mortar fire landed in the market souks. Despite the fighting, these are areas busy with city residents going about their daily business; shopping, having tea and coffee at cafes, and going to church and mosque. It's fairly obvious that militants backed by the US, UK, Israel and the Gulf states do not care much for the people of Syria - a conclusion which becomes self-evident by the fact that in every instance where there is fighting in the country, terrorists routinely and as a matter of policy randomly launch mortar and artillery attacks into civilians areas. What else is not reported by western media outlets and what anyone here will tell you, is that the only inhabitants remaining in terrorist-held areas are terrorist fighters, possibly their families, and residents who are not allowed to leave under threat of violence.

Certainly this was the case in East Aleppo, but for an area like Jobar, it's highly unlikely very many 'normal' civilians remain, as militants continue to bait government forces with 'hit and hide' mortar attacks while taking refuge in their ever-expanding network of tunnels below street level. Of course, you won't hear that from any western mainstream media outlet. For any US or UK politician or pundit to try and characterize this as 'fighting for freedom' is ludicrous to the extreme and yet, this is how low the level of discourse has sunk thanks to the efforts of Washington and London's chief propagandists who fill the ranks of what can only be described as forward military operations and information warfare run out of CNN, followed by the BBC, NBC and equivalent outlets.

Simply put, what CNN and its mainstream cohorts have been doing on a daily basis since

2011 is projecting their own self-styled, fictional narratives, tailored for a virtual sixth grade reading level audience. To suggest that somehow the terrorist occupations of Damascus neighborhoods is an outgrowth of the Arab Spring should be treated as fake news on an epic scale.



In the Old City, you can follow in the literal footsteps of St. Paul in the heart of Damascus (Photo: Patrick Henningsen)

'Jewel of the Middle East'

First impressions are of a bustling landlocked Middle Eastern megatropolis, with the modern utility of Tehran's social housing on the outskirts, but with some artisan motifs of Beirut. But none of this really means much in comparison to the time travel portal one steps through when entering one of the Seven Gates of Damascus into the Old City.

Here, history and tradition is preserved on a scale which hardly exists elsewhere.



Various Christian churches are busy preparing for Easter throughout Syria. Earlier today we visited Mar Boulos Syrian Catholic Church in the Old City of Damascus (Photo: Patrick Henningsen)

A point which has been made by journalists and travel writers who visit Damascus is that you can often see a church located next door to a mosque. It's a point worth reiterating – especially as western politicians and numerous 'experts' on Middle Eastern affairs continue to flood US television screens and talk radio, droning on endlessly about how sectarianism prevents differing communities from living together in countries like Iraq and Syria. It's simply not true, but for some macabre reason, western *experts* seem to want it to be so.

Despite the war, Damascus still remains as an important reminder that the western sectarian narrative is political sophistry projected to the public in order to reinforce a distinctly western brand of *divide and conquer* geopolitics. Different religious sects have, and will continue to thrive side by side – despite Washington and London's best efforts to set them against each other.



One of the largest and oldest mosques in the world, the Umayyad Mosque, in Old City, Damascus
(Photo: Patrick Henningsen)

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