

Damascus: Life Returns Five Years After NATO Destabilization Efforts

By [Eva Bartlett](#)

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On prior visits to Damascus, staying in the Old City, the sound of mortars being fired from terrorist-held districts outside of the city was a constant. In recent months, the mortars on Damascus have stopped. Previously, Jebhat al-Nusra (Al Qaeda in Syria), Jaysh al-Islam and the Free Syrian Army, among other terrorist factions, rained mortars daily on residential areas of Damascus, hitting schools, homes, vehicles and pedestrians, killing and maiming indiscriminately, leaving civilians, including children, with [critical injuries](#) and [amputations](#).

With the recent absence of mortars, Damascenes have opened outdoor establishments where before it was formerly too dangerous. Sidewalks cafes and outdoor eateries open at night were unthinkable less than half a year ago, let alone rooftop cafes and lounges. Although Syrians suffer immensely from an economy devastated by war and western sanctions, in Damascus there is a renewed sense of defiance, a refusal to give in, or as a young man in his twenties visiting from Aleppo said: "They have their own war against death by living."



The croissant stand in Aamarie district of Thomas Gate is known not only to Damascenes but visitors from other areas of Syria. While prices for most goods have risen all across Syria, the stand keeps its prices low: 125 Syrian pounds per sumptuous croissant. On the first day of 'Eid celebrations the stand is packed.



Wedding procession in the Old City of Damascus. Love and life continue. A newcomer to Syria might be surprised by the vibrancy of life among Damascus residents, who have lived under al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Islam mortars for years, as well as cruel sanctions. “Tawadna” is a phrase that is heard often in Syria: “We got used to it.” Even when mortars rained down, Syrians celebrated their weddings and festivals. Now, in Damascus at least, it is safer to do so outside.



The book market near the President's Bridge and Damascus University is an institution in Damascus, known to book lovers who can't afford bookstores. It is one Damascus venue which refused to shut down over the years, mortars or not. In addition to its Arabic books, one can find English language books and cookbooks, English literature, popular English-language thrillers and taudry romance novels.



In the narrow lanes of Old Damascus, a wooden mosaic artisan explains the techniques of his trade. The tediously-crafted and beautiful woodwork is a favourite for tourists. In spite of the dearth of customers in the past five and a half years, craftsmen and women continue to practise their skills in hopes that when peace returns to Syria, so too will tourists.



The Abu Zolouf bar is one among many bars and lounges opened in the East Gate quarter of the Old City in recent months. Two years ago, I sat with the adjacent restaurant owner, Nabil, outside his then-vacant restaurant discussing the frequent mortars that Jebhat al-Nusra and the Free Syrian Army were firing on Damascus, from Jobar, less than 1 km to the northeast. As mortars fell in nearby districts of the Old City, Nabil narrated close-calls he had had with such mortars hitting outside his restaurant. He also lamented the loss of customers in recent years. Since their May 30, 2016, opening, the Abu Zolouf bar has nightly from 70 to 150 patrons looking to relax outdoors.



Le Visage, also in the East Gate quarter, was among the first outdoor establishment to open after the mortars stopped some months ago. From its rooftop position, one can look down on the historic Straight Street leading up to East Gate, as well as see life on balconies opposite, where months prior they were empty. A display of lighted alcohol bottles gleam in the dark, with Jobar less than 1 km beyond. A Damascus youth noted: "Imagine, ISIS are about 4 km away and we are opening new bars. This is the Syrian people."



In an artsy restaurant along the Straight Street, stone walls are adorned with the owner's brightly-coloured paintings and a solitary board with the words "Cup of Coffee Pending" at the top. Hekmat Daoud, an artist and prominent costume designer, also the eccentric hospitable owner of Kasida Dimashqia restaurant, employs a tradition he says is common in Naples, Italy. "When paying for their bill, people can pay extra towards free drinks for students or those too poor to afford one." After a thirsty weekend, only a few promises of coffee remain. "There were more before, but students came and wanted arak and beer,"



Behind the Umayyad Mosque in Old Damascus, one of tens of volunteers daily helps prepare the Iftar (fast-breaking) meals that the Saeed Association was serving to impoverished Damascus residents, even delivering to those unable to pick up meals themselves. Starting with 3,000 recipients, by the end of Ramadan, the volunteers were providing 10,000 meals daily in Damascus alone, with another combined 7,000 meals prepared in Hama and Homs.



Volunteers from the Saaed Association relax after the second day of 'Eid activities for children. Instead of clothes or money, "we gave children hope and joy," one volunteer said. In contrast to the sectarianism imposed on Syria by Gulf States and Turkey, Syrians maintain their unity and secularism, emphasized by such volunteers whose allegiance is to humanitarianism and helping the less fortunate.



The phenomenon of children begging in the streets was not common in Syria prior to 2011. While some children work to help support their families who have been rendered destitute due to various effects of the war on Syria, according to Damascus locals, the majority of these children work in a sort of forced labour for ring-leaders coming from the eastern Ghouta region. Many associations work to provide basic services to these children. One such volunteer organization provides education and meals, teaching children not only the basics of reading and writing, but also works to instill moral values and give opportunities, however briefly in their work-day, for children to be children.



Statistics from the Syrian Ministry of Information (November 2015) cite as many as 50 “members of Syrian mass media establishments” killed while at work or reporting. Thaar Al-Ajlani, top left, was killed on July 27, 2015 when hit with shrapnel from a mortar fired by Jebhat al-Nusra, then occupying much of Jobar. Other martyred journalists have been killed by terrorists’ sniper attacks, point-blank assassinations, shellings and gunfire while reporting. Corporate media and international associations to protect journalists have largely ignored the deaths of Syrian journalists killed by western-backed terrorist factions.



Stopping to buy water in an Old City shop, the owner's only issue with me taking a photograph of his fridge is that he wants to dust off the photos of President Assad a bit first, apologizing that they are old, from well-before the current crisis.



“We are here and will stay here. Our leader and our army is our hope.” The sign speaks the sentiment of Syrians I have met in Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, Sweida, Ma'loula, and Damascus. The popularity of President al-Assad has even been admitted by western sources in recent years as at least 70%, although popular sentiment on the streets would put the figure even higher.



Children on the second day of 'Eid. Although Damascus is largely secure and safe, many living in the city are directly affected by the war on Syria, with many having lost a family member, been rendered financially-insecure, or been displaced from areas of the country.

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