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PHOTO BY ABDULWAHAB TAHHAN

Two Shabiha fighters, captured by the Fajir al-Islam group while beating protestors in Aleppo. They claimed to be paid with a roast chicken for every day they spent suppressing dissent in the city. The leader of Fajir al-Islam said the pair would be tried by an Islamic court — not executed on the spot as they would be by Jebhet al-Nusra.

Going Home, To Aleppo

By Jess Hill

October 23, 2012

Abdulwahab Tahhan, 24, spent his whole life in Aleppo, leaving for the first time last January to teach English overseas. Two months later, the Syrian revolution began. Last month, Abdul decided he had to see the war with his own eyes. This is what he saw.

ABDUL HAD ONLY JUST REACHED ALEPPO WHEN HE SAW SOMETHING HE SAYS HE'LL NEVER FORGET. Lined up outside a bakery in Qadi Askar, people had been waiting patiently for their daily bread ration. They'd been standing there for hours; for many of them, it would be their only food for the day.

Suddenly, a shell landed on the line. Arriving on the scene just after the bomb had hit, Abdul could see maimed and injured people on the ground, crying for help.

It's what happened next that is seared into his memory.

"Nobody in the line moved to help them," he says. "They called for help, but wouldn't move from the line. They knew if they moved they wouldn't have bread for the day, and they would sleep hungry." He pauses. "I don't blame them, but what a situation we have reached."

Did anyone help them? I asked.

"Yes, of course. Liwa al-Tawhid [the main rebel brigade in Aleppo] helped them."

Abdul, born Abdulwahab Tahhan, had just returned to Aleppo, the city he grew up in, for the first time in a year. He told neither his friends nor his family, still living in the city, that he was coming back. He was being escorted by his cousin, who had also just returned temporarily from overseas, to fight with Liwa al-Tawhid in Aleppo.

Abdul felt he had to travel with fighters for protection. Personally, however, he despises the Free Syrian Army almost as virulently as he does the Assad regime.

"I've always hated the Free Syrian Army," he says. "They changed the whole revolution. It's not their right to impose weapons.

They are the reason a lot of people now get killed.”

Abdul was raised in a conservative Sunni family. Several of his cousins are sheikhs who preach in the Gulf, and raise money for the FSA. But as far as Abdul’s concerned, the fighters his relatives are backing are deluded. “They’re very brave people, very good people,” he says. “You see them in the street, and they’re very humble, very nice. But they’ve been brainwashed. They believe they have to kill the Syrian army, even if it means destroying the country.”

Abdul is one of a growing number of Syrians who, though originally supportive of the resistance movement, now believe the rebel fighters have hijacked what began as a non-violent revolution. This discontent has been especially strong in Aleppo, Syria’s commercial capital, which has endured weeks of intense street fighting and fierce, unrelenting attack from Syrian army jets.

One 63-year-old Aleppo resident, Faez Shoaip, recently told the *Global Post*’s James Foley (<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/121015/aleppo-syria-rebels-fsa-assad-support>) that he and his neighbours were also growing weary of the rebel fighters operating in their area. “We don’t like Bashar, we don’t like the regime. We want them to go out. But there is an easier way. Kill everybody? Destroy the country just to change the regime? It’s too much,” he said.

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Shoaip said that after leaving the city to visit his children in Idlib last month, he returned to Aleppo to find that rebel fighters had taken over his apartment and were wearing his clothes. When Shoaip confronted the group’s young commander about it, he replied unapologetically: “This is a time of war.”

Abdul says, “The people who fight [in Aleppo] are groups of people who believe in jihad. They believe that it’s their job to free this country because it’s a battle against injustice, and they should protect the civilians.

“It’s jihad, so they should fight the regime with whatever it takes. If that takes barging into people’s places, they will barge into people’s places.”

Last year, the notion of an armed jihad was severely frowned upon by rebels, and anti-regime Syrians were simply arming themselves to defend their communities against the government’s brutal crackdown on protesters. Now, after 18 months of killing, disappearing and jailing thousands of Syria’s most cogent dissenting voices, President Bashar al-Assad has finally achieved what his propagandists initially concocted: a civil war in Syria, in which the Syrian Army is fighting an almost exclusively Sunni insurgency.

Of course, not all rebel fighters in Syria subscribe to the idea of jihad. As the International Crisis Group noted in its most recent report on the country, Syria “enjoys a deep history and vibrant practice of moderate Islamic schools of thought” which are “heavily represented within the opposition”.

But the brigades attracting the most funds — which come predominantly from rich, conservative donors in the Gulf — are those who observe the most austere Islamic practices. The easiest way for Syrian rebels to raise money now, it’s commonly said, is to grow a beard.

WHEN I MET ABDUL IN MARCH THIS YEAR, already he was wary of the Free Syrian Army. “You should hear the stories people (coming over the border) tell me about the fighters,” he said one night in Antakya, an ancient little town close to the Turkish-Syrian border. He was volunteering then as an English teacher at a makeshift school for Syrian refugees, and in his spare time he worked with me as an interpreter (<http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/rage-and-refuge-on-the-border/167/>), a job for which he refused to take money. “It’s for the cause,” he insisted.

Just a few months earlier, Abdul’s fiancée had died suddenly from brain cancer. It happened so quickly, he didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye. Now he was alone in Turkey, relying on his brother in the United States for financial support.

On his late fiancée’s urgings, Abdul had become a vegetarian, and, being an observant Muslim, he didn’t drink alcohol. His only vice, it seemed, was a deep affection for shisha smoking. But Abdul’s most striking attribute was his refusal of ideology, and his commitment to telling the truth. Interpreting for a group of Syrian activists who were clearly being dishonest, Abdul insisted that we report on it, even though it could mean trouble for him in Antakya (“*Syria’s Propaganda War*”, (<http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/syrias-propaganda-war/183/>) April 12). “It’s your job to show the truth, no matter how ugly,” he said intently, exhaling sweet apple tobacco smoke. “People must know the truth.”

“I’ve always hated the Free Syrian Army. They changed the whole revolution. It’s not their

right to impose weapons. They are the reason a lot of people now get killed. ”

Four months later, when Abdul heard that the Free Syrian Army had finally entered Aleppo, he says he “kind of freaked out”. At the front of his mind was the destruction of Homs, particularly the massacres that followed the Free Syrian Army’s retreat from Baba Amr in February. “I knew that wherever the FSA goes, destruction follows,” he says.

After several weeks of gruesome news reports and anxious phone calls, Abdul decided he had to see the war in Aleppo for himself. He arranged for his cousin, now fighting with Liwa al-Tawhid, to meet him at the border. Then he caught a flight from Beirut to Istanbul, and onwards to the Turkish-Syrian border. When the time came to cross over from Turkey into Syria, Abdul simply climbed through a hole in the fence.

AFTER DRIVING FOR TWO HOURS THROUGH the rebel-held north of Syria, Abdul arrived in Qadi Askar, a popular neighbourhood in Aleppo. Most of the buildings had been destroyed by shelling; some burned to the ground.

Suddenly, a helicopter gunship appeared overhead. “Then I heard the shelling,” Abdul recalls. “It was the first time I’d ever heard it. It sounded like thunder. I thought, ‘So this is what it’s like to hear the artillery.’”

Abdul couldn’t visit his parents’ neighbourhood, as it was still under Syrian Army control. Instead, he wanted to go to Seif al-Doleh, the neighbourhood where he grew up and went to school.

As they drove carefully through rebel-held areas, Abdul was shocked by what he saw. “I was literally jaw-dropped. I couldn’t believe that this was Aleppo, that this was the place where I was raised,” he says. “We passed by a street that used to be very crowded before the revolution. Now it was like a ghost town. Everywhere was destroyed — schools were destroyed, hospitals were destroyed. You’d see broken glass everywhere, burnt buses, garbage everywhere.”

Abdul’s voice changes, as if he’s tasted something unpleasant. “You smell death,” he says. “You just smell it in the air.”

As they sped towards Seif al-Doleh, his driver refused to slow down for photographs: “He said if he did, the helicopter would shoot at us.” When they reached Seif al-Doleh, he warned Abdul not to go to the rooftops: “There are snipers.”

“This was the street where I used to buy sandwiches at night, the mosque I used to pray at on Fridays sometimes,” says Abdul. “But now there was nobody in the streets — literally nobody. I did not even see any cats. It was very upsetting for me to see this.”

Abdul was taken to a house that had been commandeered by media representatives for Liwa al-Tawhid. The original occupants had long since fled. When Abdul asked if the house was theirs, one of the young men replied, No of course. We can go to anyplace we want. They are all empty.

“That’s why a lot of people don’t leave,” Abdul explains. “They are afraid the FSA or the Syrian Army will come and take over their place.”

“It’s jihad, so they should fight the regime with whatever it takes. If that takes barging into people’s places, they will barge into people’s places. ”

ABDUL MET FIGHTERS FROM THREE SEPARATE BRIGADES IN ALEPPO: Liwa al-Tawhid (Brigade of Unity), the city’s biggest faction, which claims to command around 8,000 fighters; Jebhet al-Nusra (the Support Front), an extremist brigade embraced by al-Qaeda adherents; and the Dawn of Islam.

All three brigades subscribe to the notion of jihad, but in different ways. “Many in Liwa al-Tawhid don’t pray,” says Abdul. “But they believe in jihad. The theory is, that during wartime, you need to connect yourself with a higher power in order to feel better.”

Jebhet al-Nusra, on the other hand, has rigid selection criteria for its fighters. “It’s impossible not to pray in Jebhet al-Nusra — it’s *impossible*,” he stresses. “If you smoke, they won’t take you in. Some people quit smoking just to join them!” For Jebhet al-Nusra, deposing the Assad regime means fighting for an Islamic state. “It’s not official that they are al-Qaeda,” says Abdul, “but everybody knows they are.”

Abdul met a young leader of the Dawn of Islam, a 22-year-old languages student from one of the villages in Idlib province, at the brigade’s base. Inside, two Alawite *shabiha* (civilians working for the regime) prisoners were being held captive by the brigade. “I asked them what they did, and they said they were *shabiha*,” says Abdul. “When I asked how much money they were paid, they said, ‘No, no, no, we don’t get paid; we get chicken every day.’ I said, ‘You are *shabiha* for chicken? Not for money?’ And they said yes.” It’s not so hard to believe. Despite the Assad family’s promotion of Alawites into elite military and

intelligence positions, many Alawites in Syria remain as dirt poor as they were before Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970.

The two Alawite prisoners being held by the Dawn of Islam were, according to the young commander, to be sent to an Islamic court in Idlib. “He said that the judges would see them, and hear testimonies from the eyewitnesses. If the judge decides they should be killed, they kill them; if the judge decides they should be imprisoned, there is a prison for them. That’s it.

“But these people are *shabiha*,” Abdul continues. “Are they going to set them free? Of course not. But this is a good thing — not to kill them on the spot, and to let a judge decide. Even though you know what the judge is going to say, still... It’s organised. There should be a higher power.”

AS ABDUL MOVED AROUND THE CITY, HE ASKED PEOPLE TO TALK about their experiences. One man he spoke to had recently lost his wife and four children; they had died in a shelling attack on his home while he was praying at a mosque nearby. Next door to his house, the man told Abdul, rebel fighters had been stationed with their *doshka* (<http://world.guns.ru/machine/rus/dshk-dshkm-e.html>), the closest thing they have to an anti-aircraft weapon. The man was reluctant to say anything negative about the fighters, Abdul surmises, because they were in earshot at the time. But the story made Abdul furious. “What did they think the Syrian army would do? Just look at them, clap for them? Of course they would come and shell the whole building.

“They started as protectors,” he continues, “defending protests from *shabiha*, from security forces. They were welcomed everywhere; until now, they are very popular in many places. You see some people welcome the Free Syrian Army — when they pass by, they say, ‘May God protect you, may the best things happen for you.’ But others just pass by in silence.

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“It’s true that the Syrian Army are doing the shelling and the killing, but they (the rebel fighters) are responsible as well,” he says. “The country is destroyed now.”

He considers it, then admits, “there was no hope” of keeping the revolution peaceful. “What else could we do? Take me, for example. Where was I? I was living abroad. I did not do anything to keep this revolution peaceful. What would I say to someone who was beaten up in one of these protests, who then picked up a weapon? ‘Hey, please stop, we’re peaceful’? He wouldn’t care. He’d say, ‘We don’t want to be peaceful, we need to be *powerful*.’”

Despite Abdul’s aversion to carrying weapons, he admits that by the end of his week in Aleppo, he was beginning to feel swayed. “Weapons are very tempting – very, very tempting,” Abdul says.

“By the end of the week I was almost ready to carry a weapon and fight. I saw my country destroyed, I saw the places that I loved destroyed, and I saw the people who destroyed it across the street. I could carry a weapon, kill them, and feel better...” he says, trailing off. “I thought no, no, no. I am against this. How can I carry weapons? But deep inside, I was very tempted.”

SHORTLY AFTER ABDUL LEFT SYRIA, he received a phone call, requesting he go to the British Embassy in Istanbul. After months of trying, he had finally been granted a British visa. He left for London the next day.

Abdul has just begun a degree in applied linguistics at Southampton University. But he feels closer to what’s happening in Syria now than he had in the months he spent living near its border. “I was next to Syria, I was in Turkey, working in the refugee camps and in refugee schools. I worked with a lot of journalists,” he says. “But it was all from outside. Seeing this revolution from outside is completely different from going there and living it by yourself.”

Abdul says he feels like it’s his job to tell people the truth of what is going on in Syria. “I want people to know that what we’re doing now — it’s because we want it. It’s an internal issue. It’s not because America or Israel want it. No. Bashar is the best friend of Israel — he protects their borders. And it’s not that we are terrorists, or doing this as an Islamic revolution. A lot of people in the brigades don’t even pray, or fast.

“I want Syrians to go back into Syria and do something useful, instead of just sitting outside giving advice. No. Do something. It was too late for me to go, and I should do it more often. If you’re a doctor, just go for one week. If you have money, buy some kids some presents. If you’re a teacher, try and teach these kids something fun. Just do something. Anyone.”

4 COMMENTS ON THIS STORY

**by Alex Van Damme**

A very relativistic story. The massacres of innocent Alawi Muslims, of innocent Christians, the systematic slaughter and kidnapping of priests and monks (Qatara yesterday a priest-monk of the Musalaha movement slaughtered by rebels for "collaboration" just for wanting peace.). They are terrorists and terroristic Salafist and otherwise "Sunni" Islamist gangs fighting against the civilian majority of Syria who support the Syrian Arab Army, even though many are critical of the Baath rule since 1973 and of Bashar al Assad. The president however gains a lot of support from moderate Sunni Muslims and from the minorities even more, due to his firm opposition against jihadism of the Wahhabi donors of the Arab Wahhabi radical Gulf monarchies and their oil dollars.... The rebels can never defeat the Syrian Army alone, as the civilians will not join the rebels. Only a very tiny Salafi minority in Idlib and some villages with radical imams might do so. The "legal court" Sharia killing of Alawi so-called "shabiha" is a kangaroo court. A shame. I am ashamed to live in a NATO country now, and have been since 1999 Serbia bombing.

October 27, 2012 @ 10:49am

**by Bud Peart**

Interesting account Jess. Strange though it was only a few weeks ago you were publicly chastising Robert Fisk for essentially writing exactly what you have just written and what most informed commentators have been saying for 6 months. That the FSA have lost all credibility as a force for progressive change and are run by jihadist networks and financed from the corrupt gulf sheiks. Now that you realize your former heroes are pretty much just Sunni fundamentalists or jihad tourists coming in for a few weeks of Shia and Christian killing.

October 28, 2012 @ 1:46pm

**by Amjad of Arabia**

I am seriously fed up of reading whine after whine about the FSA by people who frankly do not know how to express what exactly it is they are complaining about, or what alternative they would offer. For over a year, the Syrian revolution's civilian movement achieved nothing, and had to be protected by defectors risking their lives to protect flash demonstrations in dark alleyways.

The military component of a movement rises to prominence only when the civilian and political one has utterly failed, and this is what we are seeing in Syria (putting aside the Left's usual rubbish about the revolution being filled with tens of thousands of foreign Jihadis. Foreigners no more dominate the Syrian revolution than the Free French dominated the Allied invasions of Normandy in WW2). The SNC and other opposition political movements have failed to deliver on any tangible achievements. Those who would whine about the revolution becoming armed have yet to offer any realistic alternative. Frankly, the only wish they seem to have clearly expressed is to be allowed to sit in their homes and run their revo Facebook groups.

October 29, 2012 @ 2:19pm