

A Long and Dangerous Journey Home

Author: [Amina al-Yousef](#)

What should have been a simple trip descends into terror.

On the final day of my university exams in July 2014, I packed my bags and bid my friends goodbye. It was time to make the long journey back home to Kfar Nabel.

At the time, the Free Syria Army (FSA) had imposed a siege on Idlib. The city was in complete lockdown, with no public transport entering or leaving it.

The only way for me to get home was to walk four kilometres to the town of Binnish and catch a bus from there.

It was still Ramadan and I was fasting which made the journey extremely tiring. The farther I walked away from Idlib the fainter the pro-Assad songs became and the louder the sound of the shelling.

I was on the phone speaking to my family as I approached the Idlib's final government checkpoint when one of the soldiers interrupted me.

He asked who I was talking to, and whether I was giving them directions to the location of the checkpoint. He ordered me to switch off my phone and snatched my ID from my hand for inspection.

"You people from Kfar Nabel support the opposition, yet you still want to study in our areas. We should throw you all in jail," he said.

As I stood there, the sound of thumping caught my attention. I looked around and saw another soldier hitting a young man who was imploring him in a shaky voice.

"It was an accident. Believe me I didn't do it on purpose," he said.

The soldier continued to beat and kick him, while another soldier took his bag and scattered his personal belongings onto the road.

I later heard that the man had accidentally knocked the soldier's cup of tea over and spilled it.

When the small crowd that had gathered at the checkpoint was finally allowed to pass, we walked together down a long, deserted road.

Suddenly a large black military vehicle bearing the [Islamist jihadist group] Jabhat al-Nusra banner appeared out of nowhere.

We all froze, paralysed by fear. The car was heading in our direction towards the government checkpoint, probably to blow it up.

The government soldiers spotted it and started firing rounds of bullets in its direction. Two of our group were instantly injured. We had no choice but to split up. Some people ran back towards the government checkpoint, the rest of us ran forward towards an opposition checkpoint.

Two hours later, we finally arrived at the Binnish bus station. I had barely had time to sit down and rest before a loudspeaker began broadcasting a warning.

"Attention, attention! Military aircraft are advancing on the bus station."

"We need to scatter," one of the bus drivers shouted, "Hurry! Find shelter!"

The scene that followed was like one from a movie. People rushed everywhere trying to find a tree or a bush to hide behind.

Voices rose up around me. One man began reciting verses from the Koran in a final prayer, another panicked and shouted, "If they hit us we will all burn!"

At that point, I felt that I would never see my family again. The last time I had seen them was two months ago.

I heard the sound of a loud explosion. Plumes of smoke billowed around me and dust filled my eyes.

The bomb had missed the bus station and landed in a farm nearby.

We all remained in our hiding places for an hour, then emerged slowly to finally catch our buses.

When I got home my family gathered around me. The journey had taken me too long and they had been worried sick.

I greeted them and sat down to tell them about the ordeal I had been through. As I sat amongst them to rest, I could finally relax.

Amina al-Yousef, is the pseudonym of a Damascus Bureau contributor who lives in Idlib. The 21 year-old is a law-school graduate and has been displaced along with her family numerous times over the past four years.

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