

At the Mercy of the Bullets

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There is nowhere to hide when regime troops move into the city.

It was two in the morning and our neighbourhood was deep asleep.

Suddenly, the calm was replaced by a terrible clamour. Bright lights lit up the dark sky like an extravagant firework display.

We were instantly wide awake and ran to hide in corners we knew to be safe. It wasn't the first time this had happened. This was a repeat of what had been happening to us ever since the regime soldiers set foot in our city.

We lost all sense of security that day, when our city became an open prison we could not escape.

Checkpoints were set up both inside the city and at its entrances, and strict curfews imposed.

The government soldiers who manned these checkpoints swept through the houses in the surrounding streets, emptying them of all their occupants and arresting any young men they found.

They were brutal and shot at anything that moved; passersby, cats, dogs. Sometimes they just fired rounds of bullets in the air.

We lived in fear, not knowing how to avoid their gunfire, wondering if their bullets would kill, wound or paralyse us.

Once our young neighbour Mohammad was playing on his new bike when he was shot. The bullet hit his spine, leaving him halfway between life and death.

Mohammad is now paralysed and can no longer play on his bike, or with his two sisters.

His father and mother are heartbroken, yet they continue to work hard to provide for their children, hoping to offer them some sort of happiness in the harsh circumstances in which they live.

Our children are no longer safe. Those who venture out on the streets end up in the line of fire, as if punished for the sin of playing.

Many of them now opt to stay at home, but they are not safe from the attacks there either.

On this night, missiles exploded in the air, showering upon rooftops and smashing through windows and walls alike.

The regime soldiers brought their tanks into our neighbourhood., thundering through the city opening fire at the source of even the faintest light.

Neighbours shouted out to one another, urging people to turn off their lights, stay clear of windows and head towards the lower floors.

I heard some voices outside and crept to the window to see what was happening. I could barely make out the figures of five men crouching in the darkness.

They were trying to hide from the three tanks that had begun to advance down our street.

The light of a stun grenade suddenly flashed through the night, and I saw them clearly. The tanks opened fire in their direction, although moments later they withdrew to head down another street.

As soon as the tanks were gone, the neighbourhood men ran outside to see what had happened to the five strangers. They were all alive, though one of them had been slightly injured.

They took the wounded man to a woman who lived in our building and knew some basic first aid techniques. She cleaned and bandaged his injuries before giving him some antibiotics as a precaution against infection.

"What happened? Why are you here?" the neighbours asked the men.

"We're labourers," one of them answered. "We earn a living by harvesting hay at a farm nearby. We work

in the evening to avoid the heat of the sun, then load our truck and leave at nightfall.

“We got lost while driving home tonight and strayed into a government manned street. They opened fire on us so we left the truck and ran for our lives, until we got here.”

We invited the men into our homes, offering them something to eat and a place to sleep.

They left in the morning, heading towards their village. They were all terribly upset to have lost their truck and a full load of hay.

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This story was produced by **Syria Stories** (previously Damascus Bureau), IWPR’s news platform for Syrian journalists.

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Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/mercy-bullets>