

## **Syria: Humiliated for a Bag of Bread**

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Caught while smuggling food past government soldiers.

Until Syrian government forces placed Ghouta under siege towards the end of 2013, it was still possible to travel there by bus from Damascus. It was a journey of just a few kilometres, but it took a whole day.

I used to divide my week between my small house in Damascus and a cultural centre I helped establish in Ghouta. I travelled there as often as I could. The work took a great deal of commitment and a lot of my time. It was difficult, because I also needed to find a way to earn a living through my writing.

I never liked setting out on these journeys, in either direction.

In Damascus, there was food, electricity and transport, and I could wear my normal clothes, but I lived in constant fear of the regime. In Ghouta, there was safety from possible arrest, but no food, no communications, and no going out after dark; and I had to wear clothing that didn't reflect the real me in any way.

In one place, I lived with a sense of dissonance where I looked like myself from the outside but dared not live as myself in reality. In the other place, it was the exact opposite.

In mid-2013, the government imposed a partial blockade on Eastern Ghouta. Trucks carrying flour and foodstuffs were forbidden from entering, and residents had to rely on any food that people entering the area could smuggle in. At the end of that year, all traffic – goods and people – to Ghouta was banned, and the siege came to dominate the lives of everyone who lived there.

In the intervening months when travel was still possible, I used to bring in as much bread as I could for my many friends who were stuck inside.

As I prepared to leave from Damascus one morning in mid-2013, I vacillated between fear and my sense of duty. I collected the many items that people had asked me to bring – women's underwear, cash that I hid in the folds of my clothes, summer shoes, chocolate that had become unavailable and greatly prized. Most important of all, I took bread.

The amount you were allowed to bring in was constantly being reduced. At one point it two or three bags of bread per person, but then it became just one. Bus passengers travelling between Damascus and Ghouta always tried to hide food in their clothes or anywhere else where it might be missed during the thorough inspections. Some recited Koranic verses and asked God to help conceal what they were carrying from the eyes of the checkpoint guards.

When we reached the end of the long queue of vehicles at the checkpoint, we always knew what to do. We would climb down from the bus and continue on foot, weaving between the waiting cars. The bus would be searched, and we would re-embark afterwards.

As we walked, we would ask other travellers how long they had been there. The answer might be hours or days.

The final hour spent waiting in the queue for the checkpoint always seemed to go by especially slowly and full of suspense, the silence broken only by a soldier yelling or someone crying.

The checkpoint itself was a former petrol station, although nothing was left of it except a dilapidated roof and a fence. By the barrier, there was a vast pile of bags full of the bread and vegetables that travellers had been forced to discard.

The soldiers screamed at the travellers or made fun of them. There was no sympathy for anyone trying to make their way through.

Before one inspection, a soldier told us, "Get the armed rebels out of your side and we'll let you take some bread in."

On this particular day, I remember a woman pleading with a soldier to allow her in to where her son had been detained – a temporary prison housed in what was once a nightclub, behind a giant steel door.

That crying woman, the piles of bread on the ground, the escalating brutality and the exceptionally harsh inspections all made me realise that this time, the crossing was going to be different.

I became sure of this when a soldier snatched a bag of bread from an elderly woman in our group and threw it to the ground.

She approached him, pleading with him and calling on God to get him to let her take the bread into Ghouta for her family.

The soldier shouted at her to back off, and then continued searching the rest of the passengers and scrutinising their IDs.

The more the old woman begged and pleaded, the more aggressive the soldier became.

As the scene unfolded, I felt that we had arrived somewhere completely different from what we'd hoped for at the beginning of 2011. Our dreams of a better future and our overwhelming desire for freedom and respect had been smashed.

Until that moment, I had not realised that the list of goods usually allowed in had changed. I dropped the bread I was carrying on the ground and stood waiting.

I felt my cheeks heating up but didn't realise I was sobbing until one of the soldiers asked me, "Why are you crying?"

Not knowing what to answer, I began wandering in circles among the other passengers. They stared at me, afraid that the soldier's reaction might bring something terrible down upon their own heads.

He repeated his question to me, and then turned his face away as he muttered some words of complaint. But then he said, "Here, take your bread", and told the elderly woman, "You, take your things."

Then he addressed the other passengers, "All of you, take your things and get out of my sight."

Everyone picked up their belongings and climbed aboard the bus, which the soldiers had now finished inspecting. The driver drove off and everyone laughed with delight, wrapped up in their own happiness. A few minutes later, we arrived in rebel-held territory with the simple things we'd been allowed to bring with us.

But I was pained to think that our day-to-day existence had been reduced to this - feeling joyful and thanking soldiers who subjected us to all kinds of humiliation before allowing us to bring in a bag of bread or tomatoes.

What had we achieved from taking to the streets to demand our rights? And how did we get here - hundreds of residents standing submissively before ten soldiers, none of them able to utter a word of complaint, when all they wanted was to bring in a bite of food to eat?

There is nothing left for any of us now.

I had been forced to resort to exploiting my gender, using feminine weakness and tears to get what I needed. I despised myself for doing so, but then I thought how spoilt I was to have the luxury of hating myself, given the hardship all around me. I couldn't stop crying.

Everyone on the bus that day advised me, "Always cry, always cry."

But the elderly woman asked me, "Why did you cry? Is it because he wouldn't let you bring your things in with you?"

"No," I told her, and looked at my own reflection in the bus window, superimposed upon a landscape of endless grey destruction. "It was the humiliation that drove me to tears."

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