

The CROSSING

MY JOURNEY TO
THE SHATTERED
HEART OF SYRIA



'If you want to put a face
to the Syrian revolution,
try...Samar Yazbek'
WASHINGTON POST

SAMAR YAZBEK
INTERNATIONAL WINNER OF THE PEN PINTER PRIZE

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About the Book

In 2011, Samar Yazbek, an outspoken critic of Assad's regime, was forced into exile from her beloved Syria. She watched as the peaceful uprising in her homeland turned to bloodshed, and tried to alert the world. When her pleas for intervention were ignored, she became determined to take action herself. She decided to return.

The following summer, Yazbek made the first of several brave, clandestine visits, squeezing through a gap in the fence on the Turkish border. As the only Syrian writer to travel widely through 'Liberated Syria', the Northern area under the control of the rebels, she worked with local activists. Beyond her desire to be close to her people, she had a purpose: to help however she could, from building schools and comforting the bereaved to negotiating with gunmen.

Above all, Samar Yazbek bears witness. *The Crossing* is a powerful testament to the reality of Syria today. From the first innocent demonstrations for democracy, through the beginnings of the Free Syrian Army, to the arrival of ISIS, here are the daily lives of soldiers, children, ordinary men and women struggling to survive. In heartfelt, luminous prose, Yazbek shares their stories of unbearable brutality, and of the humanity that can flower even in the most terrible of circumstances.

About the Author

Born in 1970, Samar Yazbek studied literature before beginning her career as a journalist and a scriptwriter for Syrian television and cinema. Her translated work includes the novel, *Cinnamon*, and *A Woman In The Crossfire*, her diaries of the first four months of the Syrian uprising, which has won many prizes. She lives in Paris.

By the same author:

A Woman in the Crossfire
Cinnamon

The CROSSING

MY JOURNEY TO THE SHATTERED
HEART OF SYRIA



SAMAR YAZBEK

Translated by Nashwa Gowanlock
and Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp



LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

For the martyrs of the Syrian revolution.

I write, with fumbling fingers.

I write blindly.

I exist in the real world but, as I write about it, I begin to disappear.

I look at the people around me as though I were one of them. I hear the roar of real aircraft, but I tell myself: it's just a detail in a wider story.

This is my second testimony to the saga of Syria's slaughter. After *A Woman in the Crossfire*, I am forcing that gap in the window back open, letting in a thin ray of light, just enough to reveal the many layers of hell.

I am the storyteller who considers your short lives, who holds you in her gaze, just as we used to on those long nights, when we laughed out loud, guessing which of us would be struck by the next shell. I'm doing this for your sake. I can only conjure you up in my mind, and build your stories into pillars that reach from the earth up to heaven.

I am writing for you: the betrayed.

The FIRST CROSSING



August 2012

The barbed wire lacerated my back. I was trembling uncontrollably. After long hours spent waiting for nightfall, to avoid attracting the attention of Turkish soldiers, I finally raised my head and gazed up at the distant sky, darkening to black. Under the wire fence marking the line of the border a tiny burrow had been dug out, just big enough for one person. My feet sank into the soil and the barbs mauled my back as I crawled across the line of separation between the two countries.

I took a deep breath, arched my back and ran, as fast as I could, just as they had told me to do. Fast. Half an hour at a sprint – that's the distance you have to cover before you've safely crossed the border. I ran and ran until we were out of the danger zone. The ground was treacherous and rocky, but my feet felt light as I sprinted. The pounding of my heart carried me, lifting me up. Panting, I murmured to myself: *I'm back! This isn't a scene in a film, this is real.* I ran, mouthing, *I'm back ... I'm here.*

Behind us, we heard gunshots and military vehicles moving around on the Turkish side, but we'd done it: we were through and we were running. It felt like it had all been fated long ago. I'd put on a headscarf especially, and a long jacket and loose-fitting trousers. We had a steep hill to climb, before we hurtled down the other side towards the waiting car. On this occasion my guides and I weren't part of a convoy of strangers. At the time I didn't even know if I would ever manage to write about it later; somehow I'd just assumed I would die, like so many others, when I returned to my homeland. Darkness settled in for the night and everything seemed normal, as expected, or so it seemed.

Later on, after I had made this crossing a number of times over eighteen months, I saw many changes: the chaotic state of Antakya airport, near the border, would be ample evidence of what was happening to Syria. I stowed it all away in the back of my mind, along with everything else that testified to the rapid and profound upheavals taking place in my country. Back then, though, I was ignorant of what was to come as I scrambled down the hill for the first time, my legs throbbing with pain.

When I reached the bottom, I crouched down and paused for at least ten minutes, wheezing and gasping for breath, trying to calm my beating heart. The young men accompanying me must have thought I was emotional at seeing my homeland again. But that was the last thing on my mind. We had been running for so long, I felt like my lungs were being wrenched from my body and I couldn't stand up.

Finally, we reached the car and I started to breathe normally again. I sat in the back with the two men who would be acting as my guides, Maysara and Mohammed. They were two very different combatants from the same family, the family in whose home I would take shelter. Maysara was a rebel fighter who had started out campaigning peacefully against the Assad regime, but had later taken up arms. Mohammed was in his twenties and had been a business student who, like Maysara, had been involved in the peaceful protest movement before joining the armed resistance. As we worked together over the coming weeks he became a lasting friend. In the front were our driver and another young man.

We were travelling through Idlib province, an area only partially liberated from the control of Assad's forces. Between the endless roadblocks set up by the Free Army, we sped along a road lined by olive groves. Everywhere I looked there were armed militants, victory banners. I tried to take snapshots in my mind of what I could see as I

stretched my head out of the car window, detaching myself emotionally from my surroundings. The road seemed to go on forever as we drove along with the thud of shelling in the distance. And yet a sense of exhilaration tickled every cell in my body as I looked at this part of Syria, which had been mostly freed from Assad's troops.

Well, some of the land might be liberated, but the sky wouldn't let us celebrate yet; no, the sky was on fire. It felt like I was being bombarded with frenetic images competing for my attention; to take it all in, I needed eyes in the back of my head, on my ears – hell, even on my fingertips. Staring ahead, I tried to make sense of my surroundings. Machines of destruction. The blazing sky. A solitary car carrying one woman and four men, heading through the olive groves to the town of Saraqeb.

The Syria that I remembered had been one of the most beautiful places in the world. I thought back to my early childhood in the town of al-Tabqa (also known as al-Thawra) near the city of Raqqa on the Euphrates river, and my teenage years in the historic city of Jableh on the coast, followed by Latakia, the principal port city of Syria. As an adult, I had lived alone with my daughter in Damascus, the capital, for several years, at a distance from my family, community and sectarian ties. I had lived independently, free to make my own choices, but my lifestyle had cost me a great deal of rejection, criticism and harm to my reputation. It had been difficult to be female in a conservative society that did not allow women to rebel against its laws. Everything had seemed resistant to change. The last thing I'd imagined on my first visit to the rural areas of northern Syria was to see it being destroyed.

Everything I recount in the following narrative is real. The only fictional character is the narrator, me: an implausible figure capable of crossing the border amid all this destruction, as though my life were nothing but the far-fetched plot of a novel. As I absorbed what was happening

around me, I ceased to be myself. I was a made-up character considering my choices, just able to keep on going. I put aside the woman I am in real life and became this other imaginary person, whose reactions had to be commensurate with whatever it was she was living for. What was she doing here? Confronting existence? Identity? Exile? Justice? The insanity of bloodshed?

I had been forced into exile in France in July 2011. My departure from Syria hadn't been easy: I had fled with my daughter because I was being pursued by the intelligence services (the *mukhabarat*) after taking part in peaceful demonstrations in the early months of the revolution. And I had written several articles outlining the truth about the actions of the intelligence services, who were murdering and torturing those protesting against Assad's regime. But, having arrived in France, I'd felt compelled to return to northern Syria, to fulfil my dream of achieving democracy and freedom in my homeland. This return to the country of my birth was all I ever thought about, and I believed in doing what was right as an educated person and a writer, standing alongside my people in their cause. My goal was to set up some small-scale women's projects and an organisation aimed at empowering women and providing children with an education. If the situation was likely to be prolonged, there was no choice but to try to focus on the next generation. I was also looking for a workable way of establishing democratic civil institutions in those areas that had freed themselves from al-Assad's control.

Passing along road after road in the pitch-black of night, I was now heading to the home of the family that would play such a fundamental role in my new life. Cautiously we entered the narrow alleys of Saraqeb. The town was not yet fully liberated; there was still a sniper at the radio tower killing countless people every day.

The building in which I would be staying had several wings, arranged around a central courtyard. It had clearly

once been the home of prosperous and hospitable people. These days the large family were 'getting by', as one of the women put it. The oldest, original part of the building had a lovely domed roof and had been built long ago by a previous generation. I would be staying here in a room they called the 'cellar'. To the left of this wing were the quarters of the eldest son, Abu Ibrahim, and his wife, Noura: my hosts. To the right was where my guide Maysara, the family's youngest son, lived with his wife, Manal, and his children Ruha, a very composed eleven-year-old, Aala, aged seven, Mahmoud, aged four, and two-and-a-half-year-old Tala. The building was also home to the sons' elderly mother and their aunt, both of whom were pretty much immobile. They were cared for by Ayouche, Abu Ibrahim's unmarried sister who was in her early fifties.

I didn't know then, but my hosts and I shared the same vision for our country, which created a strong bond between us. As a people, Syrians are extremely hospitable. The moment we arrived everyone was mobilised into preparing dinner for us. We sat down together to eat, cross-legged on the floor on plastic rugs and foam mattresses, the young girls Ruha and Aala never leaving my side. I looked around at their friendly faces. My own relatives lived in parts of the country under the control of the regime, which meant I could no longer visit them.

That evening, I told the women in the family a little about my life and how I'd left home for the first time at the age of sixteen. By sharing these confidences, I wanted to inspire trust and give them an idea of the true meaning of freedom – and the responsibility associated with it. I wanted to show them how a woman's freedom lies in a life lived responsibly, which was the opposite of what Syrian society conceived women's liberation to be, viewing it instead as a chaotic violation of customs and traditions. I talked to them about how I'd lived and worked hard to raise my daughter, to be economically independent after my divorce from my

husband, and how I'd been forced to take on various jobs so that my daughter and I could get by. I told them how members of my family and community had cut me off, but that I had done what I had to do to become a writer and journalist. The women's questions kept coming, as I told them a little about my journey to Saraqeb.

I explained how, before crossing the border, I had visited a hospital in the Turkish town of Reyhanli, where there was a special emergency floor dedicated to Syrians wounded by shelling. One room after another reeked of putrefying patients laid out on white sheets, with mutilated feet, amputated limbs, hazy eyes. I was accompanied by Maysara and his brother-in-law Manhal, who was one of the first activists to embrace the revolution in Saraqeb. Manhal warned me to brace myself as we entered the room of two young girls, four-year-old Diana and eleven-year-old Shaima.

Diana had been hit in the spinal cord by a bullet, causing permanent paralysis. She lay there frozen, like a panic-stricken rabbit. It seemed a miracle that her small, fragile body hadn't been completely blown apart under the impact. The little girl had been crossing the street to buy a pastry for breakfast when it happened. What on earth was the sniper thinking when he aimed his sights on her back?

In the hospital bed next to Diana was Shaima, whose leg had been blown off by a shell, and whose left hand had been shattered by shrapnel. Her other foot was also injured and wounds covered her body. She and her family had been taken by surprise as they sat in front of their house. Nine members of her family were killed, including her mother. Her aunt stood at her bedside.

As Shaima looked at me, her gaze was an unsettling mixture of pleading and anger. A white bandage was wrapped around her pelvis, stopping at her upper thigh. There was an empty space where her leg should have been.

We are made whole by our imperfections, I thought to myself. And we are incomplete when we are whole. But there was nothing I could say to this child. My fingers touched her forehead. She smiled.

Shaima and Diana were not alone on the floor. In the next room was a young lad waiting for his leg to be amputated after it had been blown apart by a shell. Yet he laughed with his eyes. Another young man was waiting to have his foot cleaned up and shrapnel removed, so he could return to Syria to carry on fighting. He was a group commander called Abdullah who, when I next met him during my second trip back, would make time to talk to me, and we would become friends. I didn't know it then, but my third crossing into Syria would be undertaken with him and, in spite of the falling shells, I would have coffee with his beautiful fiancée.

In the wards of that Turkish hospital, just before the border, lay Syrians whose limbs had been left in the dirt. These young people, lying there with their mangled half bodies, gazed out of the hospital window in the direction of their home country, so near you could smell it. This, I explained to my hosts now, was where I had taken my first real step towards crossing the border.

I told them about sneaking through the barbed wire to the other side. How we had crossed from being lost in one wilderness to being lost in another. It had been a moment of oscillation, of teetering on the line between exile and homeland. There, on both sides of the fence, bodies suddenly emerged from the darkness, shoulders rubbing as they shuffled blindly on. We heard a voice greet us, 'Good evening.' Voices came, voices went. We crept by stealthily, like cats in the shadows. The border beneath which Syrians disappear in the night is just a hair's breadth: no distance to speak of. People go in, people come out; they traverse this distance in the peaceful still of night, although few will find peace at their destination. The barbed-wire fence

cannot hold them; it's as useless as trying to contain jelly in a net.

During my first stay in Saraqeb, I gained first-hand experience of the sniper who shot Diana, as I got to know my surroundings and my hosts showed me how to pass through houses to avoid the street that this assassin overlooked. Everyone's door was open to us as we sneaked through the buildings, dodging the sights of the sniper's rifle. Many of the townspeople had torn down the walls between their homes, turning these into thoroughfares. We would pass through these strangers' homes, jump out of windows or climb down ladders to street level, then slip through the courtyard carrying our shoes.

Once I was out with Mohammed and two other young men when we went through an old lady's living room. We greeted her and she greeted us in return, not leaving the spot where she was reclining, not moving an inch. She was clearly accustomed to locals traipsing in and out of her house. Before I jumped out of the window, I glanced across, searching for a sign of surprise, but she simply went back to staring at the ceiling as though she hadn't noticed the four of us. We passed through many houses in this way and managed to stay safe. It was the only way to avoid being shot.

Indeed, I would learn from the local women that on my last day the sniper had shot someone in her genitals and killed a twelve-year-old girl. Hearing that made me freeze: my legs went stiff, I couldn't straighten my knees. 'What are you doing?' the men said to me, raising their voices. 'Come on! You're going to need thicker skin than that!' The incident taught me to postpone my sadness and to keep my distress to myself.

All the same, the only victor in Syria is death: no one talks of anything else. Everything is relative and open to doubt; the only certainty is that death will triumph.

I settled in to my work with the local women, helping them to set up workshops and projects that could support them financially. But it was easy to become distracted. One day, I was getting ready to visit some widows and female relatives of martyred fighters (by martyred, I mean in a secular not a religious sense), when I found myself surrounded by a gathering of beautiful female neighbours all intent on recounting their own stories about Saraqeb. Little Aala was sitting at my side listening, pulling at my hand, while her elder sister Ruha helped her mother and looked at me askance. I wanted to please both of them. I whispered in Aala's ear that we had to listen carefully. She winked at me, put her hand under her chin and listened with me to what the women had to say.

Even without such interesting diversions, it wasn't easy to get to the homes of the women I wanted to meet. Mohammed always accompanied me in the car, but men were forbidden from entering the houses of widows, especially during the *iddah*, the period according to Islamic law of four months and ten days before a widow may be seen by another man. What was striking when I visited women in their homes, in villages scattered around Idlib province, was that their houses were always very clean, even though the water was cut off. They painted their eyebrows, their eyes sparkled, and despite their poverty the aroma of cleaning products wafted from their rooms. Even in the poorest homes, I could smell cheap soap. Women from the very poorest displaced families, those who lived in half tumbled-down, dilapidated houses, took particular care of their surroundings, and were constantly dusting with worn-out cloths or wiping their children's faces with damp towels. You have to adapt your standards accordingly when you barely have a roof over your head.

On the way back from a visit to a widow and her family, Mohammed suggested we visit the calligrapher and painter behind much of Saraqeb's graffiti, one of the most

important art forms used by revolutionary activists. No sooner were towns liberated than their walls were turned into open books and transient art exhibits. The man who provided the artwork on Saraqeb's walls was also the man who consigned its martyrs, the victims of bombings, to the grave.

'I bury the bodies,' he told me, holding out the palms of his hands as he said 'bodies'. 'I can tell you the story of each and every one of them. But it would take a long time. I bury Saraqeb's martyrs and paint Saraqeb's walls. I'll never leave this place.'

As we spoke, we were standing in front of the Saraqeb Cultural Centre, its vibrant colours shattering the general drabness of the surroundings. Across the way was a building whose front wall was inscribed with a eulogy to Mohammed Haaf, a martyred local hero: 'It's true, Haaf: an eye never forgets its eyelid, and a flower never forgets its roots.' Opposite, another wall read, 'Damascus, we are here for eternity.' We wandered through the streets. I took photographs of the walls and shopfronts of this city mired in the glorification of death; I saw notices everywhere of the funerals of young men and children, women and the elderly. On we walked in the blazing sun and dry dust. A few men passed us; their eyes were red, but radiant. We could still hear the sound of the sniper's bullets.

That evening a dark-skinned young man called by, a relative of Maysara's, whose cheeks were singed. He sat without saying a word for some time, before telling us how shells had landed in his field and burnt his hay – his bread and butter. That was it for this season. As he said this, he started to bang his head against the wall. The young man's mother was there with us and stared in horror as she realised that she had lost everything too. She gave a low wail, before she fell silent and listened with the rest of us to the sound of the sniper's bullets.

‘They’re setting fire to the farms around the town to punish the locals,’ Mohammed told me the next day as we stood looking at more graffiti. ‘But I’m not sure if they’ll drop a shell on us now. Maybe they will!’ We looked up at the clear blue sky, which trembled with the thunder of shelling. ‘When a shell lands nearby, that’s a sound you’ll never forget,’ he said, laughing. A convoy of tanks rumbled by on the outskirts of town, heading to Aleppo.

‘Later when the fighting breaks out, Sarageb will be in the demarcation zone. The shelling won’t stop,’ he told me as we set off again in the car.

We pulled up in front of a demolished house.

‘This house was shelled after being set on fire and after one of the sons was killed,’ Mohammed said. ‘The son who died was tortured in prison. He has seven sisters and one brother, and they’ve lost their father. After they killed him, they strung him up to the back of the car and dragged him through the streets, flaying his skin. He’d been involved in the peaceful demonstrations. Another guy was caught filming the demonstrations; they grabbed him, stuck him under the tracks of a tank and told him they were going to drive over him. They fired up the engine while he was underneath. They left him like that for a bit, until they burst out laughing and arrested him.

‘We’re going to rebuild what they bombed. You see that house on the other side?’ Mohammed pointed to the second floor, where there was a huge hole in the wall. ‘That’s where the sister of one of the dissidents lived. They bombed it purely in retaliation for her brother.’

Even as I recall these events, it seems impossible to write about them in any kind of sequence that makes sense. There’s no way I can narrate this in any kind of order. There’s nothing I can do but break up time.

There was the day when Maysara and Mohammed insisted I go with them to see the tank graveyard in the city

of Al-Atareb: a huge pile of burnt-out machinery, great metallic structures melted to a pulp. Traces of fire were spattered in every direction and the spilled guts of houses had been ripped apart like crushed cardboard boxes. Silence. Desolation. There was not a sound to be heard in the whole of Al-Atareb. Nothing, not even a whisper or the howl of stray dogs. This was where I realised the true meaning of the word 'annihilation'. Only at the end of a side street did we spot candlelight inside a small shop, and from afar we could see the spectre of a woman waving. These were the only signs that Al-Atareb was not an abandoned ghost town, nothing but piles of rubble without structure or identity, where all we could hear was the rumble of bombing nearby.

We got into the car to head back to Saraqeb. A commander was travelling with us, sitting to the left of me in the back. Suddenly he shifted his rifle and started to load it. I shuddered. Then he took out a grenade and clasped his right hand around it. I looked at its green mass, a few centimetres in size, and I touched it. I shuddered again. We were passing through a danger zone; the commander kept a firm grip on the grenade and pressed his gun against the car window. I noticed how, like a wolf, his eyes scoured the burnt-out landscape.

'It'll either be those dogs, the regime,' he said, 'or it'll be the thugs and looters who're plundering the area on behalf of the Free Army.'

As I would soon discover, although the name 'Free Army' might conjure up organised units of men, it actually covers an extremely diverse set of groups, with varying characteristics and attitudes – from the cruel to the compassionate. These fighting men are really just ordinary people such as one might meet in the street; they differ so widely in the extent they adhere to the moral principles of the revolution, or have lost focus of them altogether, that many of the groups seem to have very little in common. The

Free Army brigades, or the 'armed people's resistance brigades' as they perhaps ought to be called, with the vast disparity they embody, are a carbon copy of real life in all its diversity – except that in Syria death drifts among them with the lightness of a feather.

In the front seat, Maysara pulled out his gun, while our driver remained steady, focusing on the road with single-minded determination. To my right, Mohammed was also armed and ready. As we made our way through the thickening dusk, the towering cypress trees loomed over the narrow asphalt road and I feigned courage. But the gun at the group commander's side and the grenade, now back inside his jacket pocket, made me think the time had come to breathe my last. The muzzle of the gun was now pointing straight up at me – a tiny, hungry mouth, the barrel right there before my eyes. My fingers needed only to move mere centimetres to pull the trigger, and that would be enough to drown in sweet, eternal darkness. But I was woken abruptly from my trance by the commander's voice.

'We're all here together. No one's going to touch a hair on your head.'

As we drove through the half-light to Saraqeb, the commander told me a story.

'... we found him six days later,' he said. 'He was lying in the woods. He'd disappeared on 24 March 2012, the day the army stormed Saraqeb. He was wrapped up and crumpled in a heap, and there was an awful stench coming from him. From far away his body looked like an old rag tossed on the ground, but this rag was actually the body of a young man from the Abboud family. There was a lot of blood, because he had a deep wound in his neck. He'd been slaughtered like an animal. His clothes were intact, a layer of dust clung to them. He was the first to be martyred on the day the army stormed Saraqeb. We thought he'd been detained, like many others, but in fact he was dead. To us,

he stayed alive for six more days; maybe that counts for something.

‘I’m sure they arrested him in an underhand way. He wasn’t carrying his gun that day; he’d left it behind in the house. He went out and he disappeared. If he’d been carrying his weapon, he wouldn’t have submitted easily, so they must have tricked him. The incision in his neck was made from behind. He was wearing brand-new clothes, you know.

‘The army withdrew very soon after attacking the town. They fooled us. Very few soldiers remained. That was on the Saturday. Then they came back on Tuesday to try to capture Taftanaz and Jarjanaz, and to suppress the entire region again after we’d seized control. They set fire to seventy houses in Jarjanaz and a hundred in Saraqeb. The tanks came in and ploughed into the buildings; when they left, Saraqeb was just a heap of rubble.

‘They killed some of our finest young men that day. Sa’ad Barish was confined to his bed with shrapnel in his hand and leg. He was with his sister and her son at her house. They stormed the house and demolished it, then dragged his sister’s son Uday al-Amr from his mother’s arms. They dragged both of them into the street. Sa’ad, with his shrapnel wounds, was screaming, but they paid no attention and kept on dragging the two of them through the streets of Saraqeb, scraping their skin on the ground, until they disappeared from sight.

‘Uday’s mother was screaming and chasing after them. They threw her to the ground. Then they left, and we heard gunfire. The mother was running and running, then crawling, towards the sound of shooting. We found Sa’ad and Uday slumped against a wall. Bullet holes were in their heads and bodies, even where the injured guy already had wounds – in the leg and hand. They had been ripped apart by lead.

'This woman whose son had been wrested from her arms and dragged across the ground before they tore him apart with bullets ... she had a visit from some other soldiers a while later. They came for her second son. The soldiers were hungry, so she cooked them some food. One of them shouted at her, so she cursed them and said, "You're in my house, eating my food, and you're screaming in my face?" The soldier stopped shouting and told his comrades not to harm the woman, but they still took her teenage son. As they were leaving, the soldier who'd shouted seemed sad to see her crying and begging them to bring back her son. But still they went. They did bring back her son, though: dead.

'But still the rebels didn't give in. They weren't afraid of being overwhelmed, or of the shelling, or of being killed, and they continued to defend their homes, even when their ammunition ran out. Six of them were trapped without ammunition, and the army managed to break into the house, which they'd fortified. They set fire to the basement and were about to execute the owner of the house, although he was an old man, when his wife knelt at their feet and pleaded with them.

"I'm kissing your feet," she said. "I'm begging you, boys, don't kill him ... I'm kissing your feet ... Please, leave him be ... He's a good man ... He hasn't done anything." They didn't kill him, but they beat him up badly, and threw him in the street. They took the six rebels - all in their twenties - and sat them with their backs against a wall. They opened fire, shooting them all so they fell in a heap on top of each other. And the soldiers left them there, as if nothing had happened.

'The next day, they were patrolling the streets of Sarageb. They stopped Mohammed Abboud in the middle of the street, shot him and then arrested his brother Zuhair. That was also the day they killed Mohammed Barish, who was known by his *nom de guerre* Mohammed Haaf. They didn't dare confront him, because he was known for his

courage and was commander of a very popular battalion in Saraqeb. There was an aircraft circling in the sky ready to assassinate him, with men in it firing machine guns. They had a BMP armoured personnel carrier for support on the ground which launched continuous showers of bullets in every direction. After they'd killed him, and made sure he was definitely dead, they went up to him and started dancing and whooping with joy. As for Zuhair Abboud, he was released after three months of torture, and a few days later he was walking in the street in Saraqeb and taken unawares by a sniper's bullet.

'They achieved a temporary victory over us. We were firing Kalashnikovs, and they were responding with shellfire from tanks and bombs from planes. But, as I said, it's only a temporary victory.'

That's where the commander's story ends, with the first incursion into Saraqeb. His is just one story I've written down among hundreds of others.

Whenever I think of this, my first crossing, isolated moments come back to me, detached from their temporal context. I go back over the many conversations I had with the women I worked with and the young fighters I met. I keep dwelling on the wilderness we passed through as we crossed between the two countries, how we'd been greeted by olive groves and the smell of a different country. Everywhere we drove, the walls of towns were emblazoned with revolutionary posters and flags, and people stared wearily at us. In the car, weaving through the shroud of night, we would pass through checkpoints set up by the Free Army. These roadblocks weren't large and the rebels all seemed to know each other. Both in the liberated villages and the semi-liberated.

We were in the car, heading to Binnish, on our way to join the demonstrations for a free, democratic Syria and to meet one of the rebel battalions later that day. I was

determined to get to know the battalions because I knew they represented a cross-section of Syrian society. It was important to understand who they were and what they wanted, why they had taken up arms and how they intended to continue fighting – to gain a proper sense of the situation on the ground. On a practical note, it was difficult to get around in rural Idlib province without the kind of military protection they could provide.

On the way to the city, we passed through a village where we were joined by another car carrying a group of young men heading on to Aleppo in the morning. Most of them were in their early twenties. As we drove, shells exploded around us and sometimes we heard the roar of aircraft. My guides Maysara and Mohammed were quick to reassure me that we were fine, but it was still a few kilometres before we were out of danger.

There wasn't a single woman at the rally in Binnish, where I spotted banners that read *There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is the messenger of God*. I found myself alone in a sea of men; they stared at me inquisitively, an uncovered female. Although most women in the conservative countryside wore a veil, there were also unveiled women in the region. In fact, before the war and the presence of ISIS (also known as Islamic State or ISIL) and other militant groups, it had been very normal to see uncovered women in Syria. I kept my head uncovered at the rally because I wanted to feel like I was in the land I knew and loved.

In spite of their curiosity, when I was introduced to some of them they were very polite. They chanted and clapped as they took part in the demonstration, and then a sheikh came out to preach. As we weren't going to leave town straight away, I took the opportunity to talk to some of the women who had been sitting in front of their houses watching the day's events.

‘We used to take part in the demonstrations, too,’ a woman told me, ‘but now it’s no longer possible. The men are afraid for us because of all the shelling and the snipers.’

Binnish was liberated on the ground, but remained betrayed by the sky, by the treachery of aircraft and tanks. The Syrian Army couldn’t confront the rebels on the ground; after severe battles with the locals they didn’t dare enter the town. So they came at night and at dawn, firing shells then fleeing. It was mostly the children, women and old people who died, and the locals and the battalions fought on tirelessly.

‘This is our destiny,’ I heard the young people say.

That evening in Binnish, we were invited to dinner, a lavish affair. I had been the only uncovered woman at the rally, and that was also the case in other towns and villages we went to, though I quickly learned to put on a headscarf so as not to draw unwelcome attention to myself. But when I met with rebels, like the men at this gathering, I sat with them without a veil, and there were some who wouldn’t shake my hand. The conversation with them was usually very rational and secular, although they told me there were other battalions that wouldn’t accept my presence unless I were veiled. Yet no one spoke about founding an Islamic state. The conversation was always about a civil state, a secular state. At that time, the number of jihadist battalions was still low. Generally speaking there weren’t many battalions with Islamist attitudes and they weren’t widespread; they only began appearing a few months before my arrival that August, but after each massacre their numbers increased. In Saraqeb at this time it was thought that only 19 of the 750 or so fighters were Arab mujahideen.

The dinner was held in a house set in the middle of an olive grove, and our hosts did their best to offer us their

choicest pickings. The group commander was in his early thirties, a very handsome and quiet fellow, originally from the city. I was surprised by how mild-mannered and open-minded he and his fellow fighters were in conversation, and by their desire to discuss the problem of sectarianism and the pressing need for a solution. Our discussion that evening pivoted around several themes, including how important it was not to make way for a sectarian war.

‘There have been violent outbreaks in response to the brutality of the regime,’ one of the men told me, ‘but it hasn’t amounted to much, no more than a few isolated cases that were put back in line.’

A few days later the same man told me more, describing how the regime wanted to exacerbate religious differences. ‘There’s a young guy who’s an Alawite who was murdered in retaliation for a massacre, and we spoke up against it. The regime hasn’t yet finished what they want to achieve: a Sunni village hasn’t yet attacked an Alawite village. This hasn’t happened, and it’s not going to happen, even if we have to pay the price with our lives. But we can’t do anything about people’s fury if their entire family is killed, or if their home is flattened. Time doesn’t heal when it comes to that kind of anger!’

This young man was killed a few months later by masked mujahideen who were not Syrians.

During the meal that evening and throughout the rest of my stay I heard lots of detailed stories about gangs of mercenaries looting on behalf of the Free Army and kidnapping on behalf of the individual battalions within it. These mercenaries were hired by the battalions to help in their struggle against the regime, and they got involved in some of the skirmishes between armed groups, which sometimes flared up over quite trivial things. These feuds often started out as a personal dispute but spiralled out of control until members of a battalion ended up kidnapping

people from the town in question and community leaders had to intervene to resolve the problem. My hosts talked about some of the mistakes they'd made along the way and how to bring the revolution back on track. Perhaps they didn't represent the full demographic spectrum across northern Syria, the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib and Hama, as there were those in the north who didn't think the revolution should be brought back on track, yet all of the battalions I talked to said similar things.

Likewise, I learned that funding and supplies represented a major problem. Time and again, I would hear from defected soldiers that they were struggling to get sufficient ammunition, unlike the new Islamist groups who were well equipped. These groups, which had recently emerged, were described as being extremist and as being well funded by certain states. The rebel battalions spread across northern Syria mostly said the same thing: that the poorly funded fighters were doing whatever they could to avoid having to join the Islamists, such as selling their belongings. They helped each other as if they were members of the same family and sometimes they even sold their wives' jewellery.

When the commander of one moderate militant group was raising money to buy rifles, a woman took off her wedding ring and handed it to him, but he refused to take it. 'If we stoop that low,' he told me despairingly, 'we'd be joining forces with the devil. We'd be on a par with Bashar al-Assad and his regime.' He was clearly angry and despondent. He and his group didn't have sufficient arms to sustain a wider campaign. They wanted to move the fighting away from Aleppo, but they felt helpless. And they had no backing. There were arms dealers out there trading, but the political opposition didn't care about equipping the armed battalions on the ground, and wasn't interested in forming a unified command structure. The official political opposition didn't involve itself in the fighting because it was weaker than the actual revolutionary movement, which