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Remembering the Ghouta massacre

Leila Al Shami

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Two years ago the Syrian regime dropped Sarin gas on multiple locations across the eastern and western Ghouta, an agricultural, industrial and residential district on the outskirts of Damascus. It was the deadliest use of chemical weapons since the Iran-Iraq war, the greatest single poisoning of civilians since Saddam Hussain's slaughter of the Kurds at Halabja. More than 1,400 people choked to death in the attack – so many because people were sheltering from the artillery barrage in their basements, the worst place to be, where the gas sank and thickened.

For many Syrians it was a turning point. In the weeks that followed, Obama's red line turned out to be a red herring. There was going to be no international intervention to topple Assad, and meaningful assistance from the West to the Free Army would not arrive. It's no coincidence that the Islamic Front was formed shortly after, as armed brigades looked instead to Gulf countries for support. Conspiracy theories circulated by pro-regime media and picked up by sections of the pro-fascist left shifted the blame from perpetrator to victim. As the US and

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Russia negotiated the handover of Syria's chemical weapons, it became clear that Assad would be free to continue his onslaught on the liberated areas with conventional weapons and that Syrians would be abandoned to their fate.

Given this green light from the international community, Assad gassed civilians with impunity. Between 23 December 2012 (when toxic gases were used for the first time in Al Bayada neighbourhood in Homs) and 8 August 2015, the regime carried out 158 gas attacks, the vast majority of incidents occurring after the Ghouta massacre. Most recently the regime's been poisoning people with chlorine in the newly liberated province of Idlib desperate to ensure no alternative to its tyranny survives. And barrel bombs continue to shower destruction from the skies. Last month alone 368 people were slaughtered by barrel bombs across the country, among them 83 children.

In the Eastern Ghouta the situation is critical. Around 163,500 people have been under full siege since 2013 with restrictions on the movement of both people and goods beginning in 2012. The blockade has caused severe shortages of food, water, medicine, electricity and fuel. People trapped inside have resorted to eating animal feed and digging unprotected wells in the streets for survival. When goods are available on the market, unscrupulous war profiteers have pushed up prices to unaffordable levels, trying to benefit where people starve.

And the regime continues its onslaught from the skies. On 16 August, mid-day aerial attacks on a crowded Douma market place killed over 100 people and injured many more. It was an attack designed to cause maximum destruction and maximum casualties. In the following days airstrikes continued to target residential areas in the neighborhood leaving death and devastation behind. It's doubtful Douma's residents are waiting for hollow words of international condemnation or assistance which will never arrive. Corpse strewn market places, limbs pulled from rubble, a father howling over a dead child – just

one more atrocity in a theatre of horrors where human life has become so devalued.

It was here in the Ghouta where Syrians staged a fierce resistance to French occupation forces decades ago. And here where people hit-hard by the neo-liberal reforms and land seizures of the Assad regime were amongst the first to join the uprising in 2011. Even today, Al Ghouta's towns hold regular Friday demonstrations calling for the fall of the regime. But resistance is also increasingly about daily acts of survival and ordinary people pulling together in the most tragic of circumstances. It's the actions of the farmers and local councils which struggle to achieve self sufficiency in the face of the blockade. It's the actions of those who have attempted to break the siege and smuggle food and medical supplies into the Ghouta, often shot by snipers or arrested and tortured in regime dungeons in the attempt. It's the relief efforts of the White Helmet civil defense forces, young men and women volunteers from all walks of life who, putting their own safety aside, are first on the scene to put out fires and pull victims from the devastation wrought by ariel attacks.

And there are new authoritarianisms to struggle against. Jaish Al Islam, the armed opposition group in control of Douma and the Eastern Ghouta and a key player in the Islamic Front, has been involved in ongoing power struggles with the local civilian councils established through elections and popular consensus since the liberation of the area. The group, led by Zahran Alloush, has been accused of monopolizing local food supplies and is widely believed to be behind the abduction of four key revolutionary activists; Razan Zeitouneh, Samira Khalil, Nazem Hammadi, and Wael Hamada, now known as the Douma⁴. Its dictatorship has led to a wave of arrests, causing women to hold protests demanding the release of detainees and others to demonstrate calling for the fall of Alloush.

Even today, on the second anniversary of the Ghouta massacre, there have been 15 airstrikes on the eastern Ghouta so far. But there is less appetite than ever to support Syrians in their struggle for freedom or even survival. Where attention is given to Syria, it is focused on Daesh (the Islamic State) whose crimes, horrific though they are, pale in comparison to the daily atrocities perpetrated by the Syrian State.