

THE BEGINNING OF THE END?

Violence is on the increase in Syria. Now the war has reached the commercial metropolis of Aleppo. Urban warfare is raging all over its main roads and backstreets. Hundreds of thousands have fled their homes. In the villages and small towns of the north people are preparing for the end of the Assad regime.

Nothing can be heard except the uncanny drone of a helicopter which is circling over the town. Apart from that all is quiet. Twelve activists are monitoring the sky from behind barred windows, ready to take cover. Like many of the buildings in the neighbourhood the school has taken numerous hits from shells and rockets. No classes have been held in it for a long time. The last of the teachers fled two weeks ago, along with the schoolchildren and their parents, and indeed almost all the inhabitants of Azaz. Only a very few remain: those who are too poor to travel, plus a handful of activists. Azaz has been a ghost town ever since the rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the regular troops of President Bashar al Assad joined battle. Nobody here knows where the next shells will land, when the helicopters will next come hovering over the town ready to blitz rebel positions, when tanks will roll into the streets in an effort to drive out the insurgents. The question the remaining inhabitants of Azaz are asking themselves is not whether but when the next round of shelling and slaughter will begin.

The school building, a flat yellow structure, is being used as a media centre by the twelve rebels. A giant antenna is sticking up into the sky from the roof. With its help they are able to access the internet via satellite and upload photos and videos of the fighting and casualties to Facebook and Youtube. It's a desperate attempt to get the world to play its part in the civil war. For the helicopter pilots circling over Azaz hour after hour every day, the antenna is an easily recognisable target. But the school possesses a crucial advantage; it lies in the lee of a hill, and is thus out of range of the snipers who have lodged themselves in the minarets of a mosque and spend their time firing on anything that moves.

"This place is as good as any for our purpose," says Ahmed Sayed Ali, 31, a slight man with partially bald head. He has a revolver in the holster slung over his shoulder. On the wall hangs the revolutionary flag: three stripes, green, black and white, with three red stars in the middle. Next to it stands a Kalashnikov. A few exhausted rebels are dozing on mattresses. All of them are students, but now that they are no longer able to study they are working round the clock for the revolution. Every day Ahmed roves through the maze of backstreets filming disturbances and skirmishes between the FSA and government troops.

It's eight in the morning and Ahmed is waiting for a laptop to be free so that he can upload his night's filming. He is watching the screen with weary eyes and smiling. His friend Jamal, a restless lad in a check shirt and bulletproof jacket, with an outsize helmet on his head which keeps slipping down over his face, filmed an ambush carried out by the FSA yesterday. Wobbly footage shows first a tank going over a mine and being burned out, and then a second tank being hit by a bazooka. The men all slap Jamal on the back, cry "Allahu Akbar!" and set the clip to play as an endless loop. While Ahmed and Jamal are uploading their films to the internet another activist is climbing a high rise building. Al Jazeera and the Orient TV network broadcast live footage from Azaz almost every day. From up top you can get a good view of the town, watch the tanks roll in and film the shelling. This building has been hit many times. Assad's troops watch television too.

In the afternoon another helicopter comes wheeling over Azaz; it does one round after another, and hovers over the school building like an angry insect. A moment later a rocket lands close to the school. Fragments and stones shower down on the roof. From somewhere a rebel 14.4mm artillery

unit fires at the helicopter, which immediately veers away. The same evening Ahmed, Jamal and the others dismantle the antenna from the roof, pack their computers and cameras in boxes and plastic bags and move to another building. "Evidently Assad's people know where we're broadcasting from," says Ahmed as he grabs his camera and puts on his helmet. He is about to accompany another FSA night operation.

For a long time peace had reigned in this part of Syria, which is only a few kilometres away from the Turkish frontier. News from the rebel strongholds of Homs, Hama, Damascus and Daraa only got here as second hand eye witness reports. The revolution didn't reach this spot until a later stage. For a long time government troops ignored the towns and villages of the north. In the vacuum left while the crisis in other parts of the country dominated the news, more and more areas in the north were able to liberate themselves. Here as elsewhere it started with demonstrations against the regime. First a dozen or so people took to the streets, then there were hundreds and finally thousands of them, demanding reforms and more freedom. It was reminiscent of the way children rebel against any limits which are imposed on them. In due course the public managed to drive out the agents of established authority: mayors, police chiefs, members of the Shabiha, government informants and hitmen.

Abu Anas is the commanding officer of one of the three rebel units in Azaz. He is a thin man 24 years old, with long curls and a full beard. He is convinced that Azaz will shortly be liberated. Every day rebel detachments mount attacks on the last remaining government stronghold, blasting holes in its walls with home made bombs containing TNT and steel screws. At night they lob hand grenades into the soldiers' barracks, fire bazookas and machine guns and wreck tanks. Patting his Kalashnikov, Abu Anas says he reckons that no more than sixty soldiers and a handful of officers are left holed up in the building. The rebels have surrounded the base and cut off any escape route. For weeks Assad's loyalist troops have been without electricity, water or food supplies. They are gradually running out of ammunition. "Victory is nigh, inshallah," declares the young man. If the rebels can take over the town the last hurdle on the road to Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria, will have been cleared, the army will have lost a strategically important point of access to the Turkish frontier and the rebels will have gained a security corridor, a safe haven for retreating civilians as well as fighters.

Abu Anas is a conservative, very religious young man whose strength is derived from his faith in God. "I have no fear of death. If I fall in battle I'll die a martyr. That will fill me with pride." Like everyone else here he cannot comprehend how the world can sit watching Syrians die without doing anything about it. Why don't America or Europe do something to end the massacre, he asks. And he waxes furious when talking of how Russia and China have vetoed every resolution put before the UN Security Council. "We need help, and we shall accept anything we're offered, no matter from whom. Anybody who is willing to assist us with weapons or fighters is welcome. The west is scared that 'Islamists' may support us; yet they do nothing to help us."

Abu Anas is watching a video showing him and his men blowing up a tank, causing the death of its crew. "I feel sorry when soldiers are killed," he says with expressionless eyes, his head resting on his hands. He knows there are many conscripts in the army who have no desire to fight for Assad, but are forced to do so. "Most of them would like to desert, and I'm always ready to help them do so. But they have to make up their own minds. If they stay put, they'll get killed."

The Syrian dictator's army is patently breaking down. It isn't the poorly equipped rebel army or the thousands of demonstrators who pose the real danger to the regime, it's mass desertion from the Syrian army by regular soldiers and conscripts who refuse to shoot at their own countrymen.

Helicopter pilots and infantrymen often shoot wide of their target intentionally. Some officers get in touch with the rebels by phone and let them know in advance their location and plan of attack. Those who can, cross sides.

In the first part of July alone, twenty-five soldiers fled from their barracks in Azaz and joined Abu Anas and his band. More than forty deserters are now fighting for the FSA against their erstwhile colleagues in the town. Two such people are former lance corporals Fawaz, 21 and Faris, 20. They have wrapped their faces in cloth to conceal their identities. They report a loss of morale and a sense of despair among government troops. They had served sixteen of the eighteen months of their prescribed military service before they managed to escape. "They told us we were fighting against terrorists," explains Fawaz. Faris is sitting next to him, staring at his hands which he has clenched into fists. "At first I really believed it," continues Faraz. But then his unit was transferred from Daraa in the south to the northern part of the country. They moved from village to village and from town to town. First Daret Ezzeh, then Anadan, Marea, Telreffat and finally Azaz. There, Fawaz maintains, he saw officers shooting civilians, raping women and plundering houses as residential areas were targeted indiscriminately by artillery, tanks and helicopters. "We loaded fridges, TV sets, furniture, anything we could carry onto tanks and lorries." Then they burned the houses down. Faris tells how he saw an officer shoot and kill a colleague of his who had refused to fire at civilians. "From then on we knew we were not fighting terrorists at all," says Fawaz. He stresses that he always aimed to one side to avoid hitting people.

Many others would like to do as they did, say the two deserters, but they dare not, for fear of being followed and shot or having reprisals taken against their families. The majority of conscripts in the Syrian army, just as the majority of all Syrians, are Sunni, who are not prepared to shoot at their fellow citizens. More than forty thousand soldiers are said to have deserted so far, and these now form the backbone of the FSA. The number is growing day by day. In an effort to counteract this the regime is now concentrating on helicopter raids, artillery barrages and the use of tanks to force the rebels in strongholds like Homs, Rastan, Hama or Daraa to their knees.

Fawaz and Faris had been waiting a long time for a chance to desert, but it took months before their time came. An opportunity appeared when they got to Azaz. Soldiers who had deserted earlier had given Abu Anas most of the mobile phone numbers of their mates in the Azaz cantonment. For although soldiers are forbidden to carry or use mobile phones, on pain of severe penalties, many of them choose to disregard the rule "so as to keep contact with our families, apart from anything else," explains Fawaz. With help from Abu Anas dozens then managed to flee.

Fawaz and Faris were among those who wanted to get out of the army in this way. For weeks they kept in touch with Abu Anas, telephoning him secretly at night, always in terror of being caught. They would make a plan for an escape, reject it, start another. Their first attempt failed, but they managed to convince the officer who had spotted them that they had just been going to fetch some water, despite the fact that they didn't have any exit pass. On the second attempt they were able to stroll out of their base unchallenged in the early morning. The guards had fallen asleep from exhaustion after a battle which had lasted for hours. Abu Anas was waiting for them behind the barracks, and led them to the FSA headquarters.

A week after all this the rebels carried the war into the capital Damascus as well as the business metropolis of Aleppo. Meanwhile units of the FSA took over the government's last bastion in Azaz. For days they had been blasting holes in walls and fighting from house to house, until they got to the mosque where soldiers had been entrenched for several weeks. They then destroyed seven tanks. Abu Anas lost three men. A handful of government soldiers managed to escape; more than

forty were killed. Their bodies were burned in the basement of the old headquarters of the secret police. FSA fighters blew up the minarets in which the snipers had been posted. Azaz, the last obstacle on the way to the commercial hub of Aleppo, had been liberated. People who had fled the town began to return. Now the black flag of the Islamists flutters from the roof of the mosque.

In Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, which lies twenty kilometres away from Azaz, rebels in an opposition hideout are getting ready for the end of the Assad regime. Up till now the city has been largely spared by the conflict. There are just a few areas like Salah Eddine where mass demonstrations and clashes between government and opposition troops take place daily. Here is a colourful medley of lawyers, journalists, students and businessmen who gather together in secret every day. They sleep by day, and devote the night to the revolution. All of them are wanted by the police and dare not stay in one place for more than a few hours. They stay away from their own homes in order to avoid endangering their families. They sleep somewhere different every day.

Aleppo, with a population of two million, is home to many government supporters and wealthy businessmen who do well under the Assad regime. There are police, army and Shabiha checkpoints all over the city. The rebels move from one hiding place to another in a roundabout way so as to avoid checkpoints. They have to put up with lengthy detours and frequent changes of vehicle as a matter of course. On the roof terrace of an unobtrusive apartment building off an arterial road in Salah Eddine a dozen activists are having a meeting with fighters from the FSA. "We shall soon liberate Aleppo," says Abu Hamid, a 36-year old lawyer with bald forehead and light reddish frizzy hair who carries a pistol in his waistband. Like everyone else here he has lost many friends, shot by police or Shabiha militiamen during demonstrations or tortured to death in captivity. Mobile phones containing photos of the murdered ones are passed from hand to hand. Abu Kassim, a 19-year old FSA fighter, shows some videos he has stored in his phone. In one, some rebels cut off the heads of two living young men in cold blood and then lay them on their dead bodies like trophies of a big game hunt. The victims are said to have been members of the Shabiha and themselves responsible for a number of murders. The man who passed judgment on them was also the one who executed them. Another video shows the mutilated bodies of twenty-five men who are likewise said to have belonged to the Shabiha. "We killed them. I was there. They deserved to die," says Abu Kassim, lighting a cigarette. "But we shouldn't have cut their heads off. That's what the al Qaida do, and we don't want to have anything to do with that lot." A freedom fighter sitting beside Abu Kassim shakes his head. "Bullets cost money we don't have. Beheading is an economical process. Until somebody comes to our aid any method is justifiable."

For hours the group discuss what is the best way of smuggling weapons into the city; which areas should be liberated first; whether Assad should be put to death or brought to justice; what is to be done with people loyal to the regime. Some are in favour of summary execution; others argue that that is not a good move towards establishing a new state in which all Syrians can live together in peace. "We must control our hatred. We have always lived alongside Christians and Alawites, and they too belong to Syria. Only those who have committed crimes should be brought to justice and punished accordingly. Inshallah!" says Abu Tarb, another of the lawyers in the group. Whilst they are discussing and smoking, and fighting exhaustion with quantities of coffee, a dull whine of artillery can be heard from the cantonment as troops fire mortar shells into a neighbouring area. The men are startled. "Fear is our constant companion," says Abu Hamid.

Shortly after midnight shots are fired close by. FSA fighters with Kalashnikovs are taking up positions behind the balustrade of the roof terrace. The owner of the building takes his wife and their five children to safety at a neighbour's house. Abu Hamid the lawyer flicks the safety catch of

his pistol and stands on guard just inside the entrance, in case the army or police come and storm the apartment. Not until early morning do the men finally fall asleep, exhausted.

Twenty-five kilometres west of Aleppo, in the courtyard of a house on the edge of the small town of Al Dana, a group of men in combat fatigues have assembled. They are carrying assault rifles over their shoulders and have hand grenades dangling from their belts. They are painstakingly making lists of the contents of some sacks piled on the floor in front of them. There are brand new sniper rifles, masses of ammunition, bazookas, Belgian assault rifles and dozens of image intensifiers still wrapped in polythene. When the commanding officer holds up one of these devices his men cheer and dance about. "Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!" God is great, they cry, brandishing their kalashnikovs above their heads. Nobody is willing to divulge the origin of this consignment of weaponry. The officer just smiles and remarks that the rebels have certain friends who support them. Then they put everything back into the sacks, tie them up and load the munitions into the luggage compartments of various cars, taxis and minibuses. They change from battledress into civilian clothes, pulling on jeans and shirts. Around thirty fighters squeeze into half a dozen vehicles. Their destination: Aleppo. Under cover of night they get under way, using country lanes and long detours to avoid Syrian army checkpoints. Scouts on motorbikes ride ahead to reconnoitre and see whether any road blocks have been set up by the army. They keep in continuous contact with the guerrillas, who follow a few kilometres behind.

It takes them more than three hours to cover the 45 kilometres into Aleppo. In the suburbs fighters and activists take delivery of the cargo of weapons, ready to distribute them in various parts of the city which have been infiltrated by hundreds of FSA guerrillas over the past weeks and days in preparation for the seizure of the metropolis.

The civil war in Syria has been escalating since mid July. The insurgents first brought the war into the capital Damascus, setting off a bomb in the national security council building and killing four high ranking government officials including the defence minister, the home minister and the President's brother in law. After that FSA units and government troops engaged in pitched battles in various parts of Damascus, causing scenes of the fighting to reach even the screens of the state television company. Thousands of people fled from the city. A few days later fighting broke out in Syria's second largest city Aleppo. The regime hit back with assault helicopters, tanks and artillery, shelling the quarters occupied by rebels with bazookas and rockets. Explosions rent the night air in northern Syria like thunder.

Idlib province is one of the rebel strongholds. There the Syrian army has to a large extent withdrawn into its own bases. The government still controls parts of major cities like Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and Hama, and is militarily superior to the insurgents, but the supply of new weapons has had an effect, and minor towns and villages are in rebel hands. Young Sunnis in rural areas are joining the FSA in droves, and every fatality seems to harden their resolve to bring down the regime. Supporters of the regime and members of the Alawite, Shia and Christian minorities have fled in fear of acts of revenge carried out by the rebels.

Atarib, a town seven kilometres from Al Dana, shows signs of the fierce fighting in this area. In early July FSA units drove the last detachments of the Syrian army out of the town. Whole streets have been destroyed. Everything is quiet, for war has sucked the town dry of inhabitants. There is nothing but a hot breeze blowing through the streets, swirling the dust. House fronts are disfigured by the pock marks of bullet and shell damage. There are burned out shops, bullet holed shutters, mangled bits of steel, torn strips of corrugated iron sheeting. Road surfaces have been ploughed up by shellfire, everywhere stand incinerated tanks and pile-ups of smashed vehicles with caterpillar

tracks. An old woman is sitting dazed among the ruins of her home. Atarib is a ghost town in which the only people left are a few destitutes, peasants, old people and some rebels and activists. FSA guerrillas there to defend Atarib ride on motorbikes through the battered streets, sounding their horns, celebrating the good news from the capital. A man is standing on top of a ruined tank in triumph. Holding his arms up high and making the victory sign with his fingers, he shouts, "Bashar is a donkey!"

The first shells hit Atarib as the sun is going down. Two of them land near an FSA post. The rebels lie down flat on the floor of the basement or creep into corners and wrap their arms over their heads as protection. A shell has only just missed the building; smoke is coming through the window and making everyone's eyes water. It smells of sulphur. "The army shoots at us every day, but they aren't able to hit us," laughs an officer who, before the revolution, used to study political science in Damascus. Two more shells come down close to the house of the last remaining doctor in Atarib. Nobody is hurt, but it is the first indication that the army is starting to hit back. Only a small section of the rebel army has stayed behind to defend the town. As in all the villages and small towns in the north of Syria many rebel units are gathering their weapons and moving to Aleppo to help expel the government troops from the city. Fighting has been going on there for days.

People in Atarib and Al Dana feel certain that the regime is on its last legs. It's no longer a question of whether the end will come, but when. Some think it will only take days, others are of the opinion that it could still take weeks. But anxiety is mixed with joy at the rebels' success. Many fear that the Assad regime will exact revenge for the attacks on Damascus and Aleppo. Hundreds of refugees from Atarib have taken refuge with friends and relatives in Al Dana. During the night a vague feeling turns into a certainty: shortly before eight in the evening shells come whistling and hissing through the air, and white plumes of smoke rise over Al Dana. Explosions light up the night in bursts like some giant stroboscope. Heavy artillery hammers the town from all sides. A young man points at a winking light in the sky which hums quietly as it moves. A drone is flying over Al Dana. Seconds later rockets slam into residential areas and FSA positions. Tracer bullets tinge the night with orange light. Fathers and mothers, holding their children by the hand, rush into the safety of their houses. Those who are able to flee from the town. Cars and minibuses crammed with people and their most essential belongings are driving in one direction, while in the opposite direction go landrovers and motorbikes carrying heavily armed rebels. A shell detonates. On the outskirts of the town the rattling of rebel machine gun fire can be heard. Another shell slams down. Weapons converse with one another.

Meanwhile chaos reigns in the hospital in Al Dana. Men are carrying wounded civilians and rebel soldiers into the waiting room, or dragging the dead and wounded across the tiled floor leaving a broad trail of red blood. A nurse is kneeling on the floor mechanically mopping up a pool of blood with a cloth until nothing remains but a pink stain. There are people grieving for friends, colleagues, brothers, sons. In front of the hospital entrance some angry rebels are firing into the air while an orderly begs them to stop, lest they attract shell fire towards the hospital. The clinic is short of both staff and medicine. There are a doctor, an anaesthetist, two nurses, two orderlies, and not a great deal they can do.

Amidst the chaos Dr Ibrahim, the hospital's only doctor, hurries from patient to patient. His white hair is sticking up wildly from his scalp, he has a stethoscope hanging round his neck, his lab coat is smeared with blood. He goes to attend a man lying on a stretcher. Blood is dripping from it and gathering in a large pool on the floor. He shines a torch into the patient's eyes; his pupils are dilated. Dr Ibrahim turns the man onto his stomach. His back has been torn open by shrapnel. Dr

Ibrahim shakes his head. The man is dead. The orderlies carry him away, his head lolling back on the stretcher.

The doctor fights his way through the crowd to the next patient, pushing aside a number of weeping and wailing bystanders. An FSA guerrilla is lying on the ground. He too is dead. At the same moment yet another dead man is brought in. On the edge of a seat lies an unconscious man whose foot is dangling from his leg, to which it is attached only by a strip of skin. Orderlies carry him into the operating theatre. "What difference can these casualties make?" asks the doctor in broken English "Syrians like us are being murdered day by day all over the country. And nobody is taking any notice."

A few streets away in the basement of Abu Mustafa's house eight people are squatting on the floor listening to the shelling as it draws steadily closer. Abu Mustafa, a 54-year old man with a white crew cut and a rattling cough, is chain smoking while he strokes the hair of his two small granddaughters who are clinging to him in fear. "Ma fi mushkila, ma fi mushkila," he murmurs over and over again. No problem, no problem. His face is smiling but his eyes are not. His hands are trembling. As he's too old to fight, his basement is used as a field hospital for wounded FSA fighters. "This is my contribution to the revolution," he says, jumping every time there is an explosion. 21-year old Hassan Abid is lying on his sickbed nearby. During the battle for Atarib a bullet shattered his right leg. His face ashen, he is saying a prayer. Every time a shell falls he presses a pillow over his head as if it were a shield which could protect him from danger. In the course of the night two FSA soldiers come to guard the wounded and the host family. The fear that army or Shabiha detachments might storm the town and carry out a massacre as they did in Houla and Tremseh is ever present.

A shell strikes home close to Abu Mustafa's house, the walls shiver, a window pane shatters. Those of the people who are able to walk go to seek refuge under the well of the stairs. Abu Mustafa remains in his living room and unrolls a prayer mat. While the shells are falling over Al Dana Abu Mustafa, a taxi driver friend and the FSA fighters say the dawn prayer together. Eyes closed, hands directed towards Mecca, Abu Mustafa prays to God for protection.

The attack lasts nine hours. The final bomb falls at 4:35 in the morning. It kills two sisters in their home. Other family members armed with a torch search among the ruins for body parts. They carefully gather what remains of the women - an arm, a foot, part of a head, a headless torso, brains - and put them into a black bin bag. And then the sun rises.