



In a war with many villains, these are the good guys. Seven days inside the life-and-death world of Syria's first responders—the last hope for civilians caught in the chaos.

**By Matthieu Aikins**

*Photographs and video by Sebastiano Tomada*

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**The dawn found** them sprawled like corpses around the cramped station room, atop a collection of soiled floor mats and a metal bunk that listed heavily to one side. They lay close together, some still wearing their uniforms from the night before. On a typical day in Aleppo, they would soon be woken by the sound of helicopters and jets roaring in to drop the first bombs on the rebel-held side of the city, which the regime has sought to pound to dust. But it was quiet this morning, and so they slept.

Standing outside his office next door, Khaled Hajjo, leader of the Hanano Civil Defense team, dragged on the first of many Gitanes and surveyed his small domain. The one-story, cinderblock station house was set in the corner of a large concrete lot the size of a soccer pitch, its perimeter hemmed by a 12-foot stone

wall. At the far end of the lot was a mass of stacked old tires and a broken-down lifting crane. It had once been a car impound, but like so many buildings in Aleppo it had been repurposed for the war.



Civil Defense volunteers, asleep in a pile, during a rare pause in duty.

The station wasn't particularly sturdy. The neighborhood it was in, Hanano, was close to the front line and exposed not only to bombing but to artillery fire. Even a mortar round would probably cave in the roof, never mind the big howitzer shells that sometimes crashed into the lot. But the station had its advantages: It was set on a rise, with only a few low buildings surrounding it, and from here they could quickly spot the telltale smoke and dust pillars that mark the sites of bombs, and then rush to the rescue.

They had been in this station since the very beginning, more than a year ago, when the team was first formed, and they had stayed in it through the long winter of massacres, through the worst times when the population had desperately fled the city, so that now the government's bombs fell as often as not on abandoned buildings. This was their home.

Parked out front was a cherry-red truck with FREIWE. FEUERWEHR, shorthand in German for "Volunteer Fire Department," along the side door in raised letters and, beneath it in Arabic, "Aleppo Civil Defense," spray painted in black. A well-built truck, donated by the West, it was starting to show its months of use in a war zone, with several bullet holes pocking the door and crazing the windshield. But it still got the job done, speeding them to blast sites.

The members of Civil Defense were attendants to the city's trauma, one of the few first responders left to care for the civilians caught on the front lines in a war between Syrian President Bashar al Assad and rebel fighters. The team evacuated the injured, cleaned up the bodies, and fought fires. But what they were best known for — what they had become famous for in Syria and abroad — were the dramatic rescues, the lives they pulled from under the rubble.



The team's rusty but reliable rescue vehicle.

When they spotted a blast, they'd cram into the cabin, ten or more on its two bench seats, and set off in search of the impact site. The truck had a loose, shaky suspension and the cab would smash up and down off the craters and potholes, jangling the men like change inside of a tin cup. The siren atop was an old-school wailer, deafening and sonorous. Sometimes they'd catch sight of an ambulance and give chase; often they'd be the first to the scene. As they rushed along, they'd lean out and ask pedestrians where the bomb had fallen. They could tell by the reaction if they were getting closer. At first it was just a pointed arm or a shrug, but as they neared, the onlookers would get increasingly agitated, until they saw in their eyes the wildness of a close brush with death or the panic for a trapped neighbor. The missions were all the more dangerous because of the regime's tactic of "double-tap" strikes, where they would return to bomb the same site and hit the rescuers and whatever crowd had gathered. In March, three members of the Hanano team had been killed that way, along with an Egyptian-Canadian photographer who had come to document their work.



A Civil Defense member calls out to onlookers en route to a bomb site.

Khaled flicked the cigarette into the parking lot. Thirty years old, he looked more like a graduate student than someone who had spent the last year immersed in blood and rubble: shaggy hair, a straight, full-bridged nose and a pointed jaw softened by full lips and cheeks. In a city dominated increasingly by anti-Western Islamist groups, he had until recently worn a pony tail. He was growing a slight paunch from all the nights spent sitting up snacking on fruit and nuts, listening to the sound of the city's bombardment and waiting for a call. When he smiled, a net of crow's feet crinkled into the corners of his eyes, but mostly his face maintained an unshakable placidity, even in the presence of death. It was this stillness, more than anything else, that accounted for his unruly team's respect and obedience. "It's the quiet ones you should fear," was how Surkhai, the group's joker, had put it.



Khaled Hajjo, the leader of the Civil Defense team in Hanano, reflects after a grueling day.

After washing his face in the rickety outbuilding that served as their bathroom, Khaled returned to his office, which was furnished with a scuffed desk, a shelf that held the station's paperwork, and a couple of love seats. On the wall hung a certificate of appreciation from the city council. Two bare bulbs dangled from the ceiling.

Khaled could hear the rest of the team stirring. Present that day were some of his most reliable veterans — though of course they were really still boys. At 28, the twins, Surkhai and Shahoud, heavysset with thick hair covering everywhere but the top of their heads, were among the eldest. The rest were mostly 20 or 21. Scrawny Ali, with his mullet, was only 19. Only Ahmed, a lanky, goateed kid who had been a firefighter like his father, had any experience as a first responder before the war. In all, there were 30 of them, but they worked in shifts, so that only a dozen or so were typically in the station at any one time. Except for the leader, Khaled. He had not taken a single day off. He loved the team — loved the physical closeness, the emotional bond. These guys had become his life. His old self, the former law student who taught at a trade school, seemed as remote to him as his family's home, now behind regime lines.



Team members relax in their command center — formerly a car impound.

The morning's quiet extended into the afternoon. Khaled couldn't believe how calm it was. Almost eerily so. It had been two days since the last big slaughter, when a bomb hit a vegetable market and killed several dozen people. Perhaps, the men speculated, the regime had been as stunned as everyone else by the fall of Mosul, in western Iraq, to the Al Qaeda splinter group known as ISIS. The summer heat was waxing in Aleppo, and Khaled decided not push them to train or clean. So as the day unspooled, Ahmed played with Lulu, the mangy calico who hung around the station, while Surkhai and Ali took part in the listless card game in the bunk room.

Meanwhile Khaled pulled aside Annas, whom he was grooming for a leadership role, and they sat close on a love seat and talked about the team — who was doing well, who looked like they needed a rest. Annas was slender and had the long eyelashes and finely-turned jaw of a teen idol; he looked much younger than his 21 years. He carried a pistol tucked into the back of his belt. Sometimes the guys teased him for being so pretty, but he took it in good humor — now that young women had nearly disappeared from public view in the war-torn city, he joked, men were starting to hit on him. "The other day, I was in the market and a jihadi with a big beard spotted me and came over," Annas told them, and then imitated accented Arabic.

"Ya sheikh, ya sheikh! What? 'Smoking is sinful.'" Annas pulled on a Winston. "I know." He pretended to look someone up and down, making eyes.

"Ya sheikh, ya sheikh! What? 'Can I have your Facebook?'"

The group burst into laughter.



They should enjoy the lull, thought Khaled. Everyone in Syria was hungry for work, except them. But he knew the team would grow restless without action. The shared risk was what held them together. They even had a chant they sung as they rushed to the impact site:

Hey fucker, you're buried  
We're coming to find you.  
Hey fucker, you're burning  
We're coming to put you out.

**As the evening** light began to lengthen shadows, the team heard a dull roar in the distance. The regime's helicopters were back. The group was highly attuned to the noises of the city, like hunter-gatherers listening to the animal sounds of a forest. At night, Ahmed would describe them from his bunk. "That's an artillery shell. That's a jet. It's going to fire its Dushka," he'd say, and then would come the crash of the MiG hitting the front line with its cannon, like someone pulsing a blender. Sometimes a helicopter would be flying directly above them and they'd remain unmoved, noting that the thump of its rotor meant it was traveling somewhere, its blades digging in like an oarsman's. A helicopter getting ready to bomb you hovered, the noise it made more akin to the deep growl of a jet engine.



Khaled and his team mount up and respond to a call.

This one was way high up, a pale speck, and as they stood out in the parking lot watching it, a dot detached from it and tumbled slowly to earth, its impact announced by a mid-distance boom. It was a Russian-made Hind transport helicopter dropping a barrel bomb, the improvised but lethal explosives the regime had come to favor. Made out of empty fuel barrels or propane tanks, barrel bombs combine crude fuses with as much as two thousand pounds of TNT, along with pieces of junk steel and rebar that turn into red-hot shrapnel on detonation. They are as big as most conventional bombs, and a single hit is often enough to collapse the shoddily built concrete apartment complexes that comprise much of the city. The Syrian forces couldn't really aim them, but that didn't matter. The objective of the barrel-bomb campaign was to terrorize the population and render the city uninhabitable.

The team waited for the second bomb to fall away—the helos usually carried two—and then jumped in the truck and rattled out toward the bomb site. Their wheel man, Abu Sabet, a mournful-faced older taxi driver, had worked big rigs before the war. He had an artful command of the little truck, whipping it nimbly through the rubble-filled streets. The bomb had fallen in a sparsely built neighborhood; several local men standing nearby said that no one had been hit. Khaled decided to get down and make sure; toddling over strewn cinderblocks, the team moved forward among the shattered little houses. The air was still thick with pulverized concrete dust, golden in the dusk. “Al defa al madani, hada houn?” they yelled, into the rubble. “Civil Defense, anyone there?” There was no answer. “Guys, let’s go,” said Khaled, waving with his radio. The helicopter might come back.



What once was a car — and, inside, its passengers.

Back at the station, they stood outside, joking. The brief call had stirred them out of their daylong torpor. Suddenly, Abu Sabet pointed directly above them. “A plane!” he said. They all jumped and looked skyward—but it was just a star in the lavender sky.

“Planes don’t fly with their lights,” scoffed Annas.

“Maybe the pilot left his handbrake on,” joked Surkhai.

**‘When I saw the bomb drop here, I came as fast as I could,’ he said. You could see the whites of his eyes. ‘God has saved you because he wants you to save others.’”**

Looking sheepish, Abu Sabet got into his little taxi and drove home. He had a wife and kids who still lived in the city. The rest of the team settled into their nightly routine of laying about the bunk room, which held, in addition to the bed and sleeping mats, a fan, a propane burner, and a small television on which they would get the rebel and regime news broadcasts. One of the guys had brought a plate of cool, purple plums from the market. The rebel-held half of the city was still not yet fully besieged—the regime and ISIS were closing in from both sides—and there was still food in the few markets that remained open. They sucked the sour pits and cracked open a bowl of peanuts. An hour passed. And then there was a tremendous flash and boom.

To be hit by an explosion at close range is to experience light and sound as darkness and silence; silence as your ears ring louder than any sound, darkness as dust and smoke envelop you. The air filled with flying chunks of cinder block, and the men were pitched forward onto their hands, the floor suddenly gritty with debris. Khaled leaped to his feet and rushed with the rest of the team out into the pitch-black lot. The station had half-collapsed, and the power had gone out. One of the guys, Omar, had been hurt and a group led by Khaled threw him into the cab of the truck and peeled out. The rest of the team ran across the road and crouched in a narrow space between two houses—they could hear the planes coming back in, and could see red anti-aircraft tracers arc up from the rebel positions to meet them. Another blast sounded close by; the door to one of the houses opened and a young couple, the man cradling an infant in his arms, came out and hurried off into the night.

After about 20 minutes, the bombing subsided, and they dared to smoke again. Annas and Surkhai came out and stood by the road. The moon had risen in a yellow half-circle above the station; no one wanted to go back in, for fear the planes would return. An ambulance screeched up, and the driver got out, gaping at them in astonishment. “When I saw the bomb drop here, I came as fast as I could,” he said. You could see the whites of his eyes. “God has saved you because he wants you to save others.”

The firetruck returned, and Khaled got out. “Omar’s okay,” he told the group. “He just cut his foot.” He stood for a moment and surveyed the grim-faced half circle. The guys were badly rattled. But the Hanano team had never run from the site of a blast. He quickly made a decision. “We’re going to stay here tonight and guard the station,” he announced. “And in the morning, we’ll go somewhere new.”

Nodding their assent, the guys lit up fresh smokes and started joking to break the tension.

“I hope we move to a nice big school,” said Annas.

“They always bomb schools,” responded Surkhai.

They sat in a line on the curb, leaning their shoulders against each other and listening to the shelling, their cigarette embers blinking in red procession, until the sun rose in place of the moon.

**By daylight, they** saw how close the bomb had fallen. The large house next door had vanished; in its place was an enormous crater filled with crushed debris. At the center of the crater were a few twisted sheets of heavy steel, the kind used in underground propane tanks—all that remained of a very large barrel bomb. It had obliterated the house and blown down a 20-yard section of the heavy stone boundary wall, before smashing in part of the station. If the bomb had dropped ten yards closer, they would all have been killed.

The loss of the station was a psychological blow. They had mourned their teammates there. But the building was on the verge of collapsing, and they had no choice but to move. There was no shortage of empty buildings in Aleppo to choose from, and early that morning Khaled had surveyed a school in a

neighboring area. It was a sturdy, three-story building with a basement they could shelter in and a big parking lot for the trucks. It would do. Khaled called another Civil Defense team — there were four in Aleppo — to bring a dump truck so that they could load up the gear from the station.

As they were pitching equipment into the dump truck, they heard the roar of an incoming helicopter and, spooked from the night before, ran for cover. Two booms sounded in quick succession, and the team came back out, dusting themselves off and kidding about who had run away fastest.

A call came over their crackly, shoddy radio: Civilians had been hit. Khaled delegated his protégé Annas to take the rescue truck, and he and several of the guys jumped in and raced toward the smoke, the siren wailing. The bomb site was on a main thoroughfare in Sakhour, near a park and an intersection that had been sliced in half by a high earthen barrier to protect against snipers. “Stop stop stop stop stop,” shouted Annas when they’d reached a safe distance; the team jumped down and started running toward the site.



Civil Defense members rescue a man who had been trapped inside his home after a barrel bomb collapsed it.

The helicopter had dropped two big barrel bombs: one cratering the road, and a second falling on the edge of the park, which set a large palm on fire. There were a number of cars scattered around, some of them now twisted hulks. A crowd of rebels and civilians, as well as several ambulances, had already gathered.

Ali ran toward a barely recognizable object on the sidewalk. It was a portly man who had been stripped of his clothes and powdered the color of concrete dust. He had been severed in half at the navel; his intestines were scattered behind him and one of his legs was folded up over his shoulder. He lay face down, and his eyes were closed, but as Ali ran up, his chest rose and fell a single time. Then he was still.

Ali pulled on a pair of white latex gloves. There was nothing to be done for him. Taking a blanket, he gathered up the pieces as best he could, and then bundled him into the back of an ambulance, where bodies were accumulating.

A rebel shouted from the road: “There are children in that car.” Annas ran over to a little blue sedan that lay crumpled near the site of the second bomb; it looked as if it too had fallen from the sky. He started prying frantically with a crowbar at the rear door; a mother and her children were still in the back seat. The mother had been decapitated by the blast, and the children were pale and immobile. As he hefted their small bodies out, he saw why. The little boy was missing his right leg below the knee, and had bled to death. His sister had taken a fatal piece of shrapnel through her chest.



A child's body is lifted from the wreckage of a bomb strike.

The site was close to several hospitals, and the wounded—including the driver of the sedan, the children's father—had already been carted away. The team realized they were just recovering bodies from the wrecks. They worked urgently; the site was wide open and exposed and the helicopter might return at any minute. It was hot and there was a sharp stench in the air, more acrid than blood. Someone yelled that a plane was coming, and the crowd broke and ran in a panicked herd. But it was a false alarm. When the last body was out, the team climbed back into the truck; the whole affair had taken 15 minutes.

Back at the station, there wasn't even water to wash the blood from their hands. The bathroom had been destroyed in the blast the night before. No one had slept for 24 hours, but everyone dug in to help empty the ruined station of its cargo: the beds and desks, all the donated rescue gear from the West. Surkhai and Ahmed came out carrying the old couch from Khaled's office, but as they lifted it upward it let out a plaintive mewling. “Lulu!” said Ahmed. They tilted the couch and shook it as if they were tipping out spare change; after a moment the calico sprung onto the concrete and began rubbing herself against their legs, another survivor.

**In contrast to** the Hanano station, their new home was a sturdy, three-story, L-shaped fortress made of thick concrete and stone. It had been an elementary school before the war. Since then, like many government buildings, it had held a succession of tenants. The markings on its walls served as a history of the revolution's stalled arc. Atop the original paintings of flowers and butterflies were several layers of graffiti: a perhaps pre-revolutionary "A♥M," "Free Syria," the slogan of the demonstrators; the names of a few of the hastily-formed rebel militias, or "katibas," that had taken over the area; and finally, the sinister black flag of ISIS. The Islamic State had been a menace in Aleppo and the northern countryside; last October, when Khaled had gone to pick up a big shipment of five fire trucks donated by the West, an ISIS commander at the border had arrested him and impounded the vehicles. ISIS was finally forced out of the city by the rebels in January, but now they were on the rise again, their forces less than 20 miles to the east, and advancing.

Though they all considered themselves faithful Muslims, most of the team wasn't interested in the Islamic fundamentalism that had come to dominate the rebel fighting groups. Fed up with the corrupt, repressive regime of Bashar al Assad, they had participated in the peaceful demonstrations that began during the Arab Spring in 2011. But after the murderous regime crackdown on the demonstrations, the movement turned to armed rebellion. By July 2012, the rebels had seized half of Aleppo, settling into a stalemate along front lines that had largely been unchanged since then.

At first, life in the rebel-held part of the city had been full of hope. Rebel advances in the countryside had opened up the supply lines to Turkey, and many refugees from the initial fighting had returned. The markets were bustling and full of goods, and many civilians had volunteered to keep the city running. Khaled himself joined a rebel office that distributed food to the needy, and then volunteered as a school teacher. But the bombardment by jet and helicopter intensified, much of it targeting ordinary people. In February 2013, several giant Scud missiles landed in rebel-held neighborhoods, each leveling dozens of homes and killing hundreds.



In the Old City of Aleppo along the front line, large tarps are hung in between building to limit the view of regime snipers who have been targeting rebel fighters as well as civilians.

By then the need for some kind of urban rescue team had become apparent. The bombs didn't just kill or maim people; they trapped them under the rubble. Each strike was like a pinpoint earthquake. When a building collapsed, the whole neighborhood would turn out, swarming the rubble, frantically picking at the concrete. In the pandemonium, you couldn't hear anyone buried or calling for help. Sometimes someone would come along with a backhoe and start tearing at the rubble pile, often killing those who were still alive inside. It was possible to save those who were trapped—if they weren't badly injured, they could stay alive for days—but it required trained rescuers.

The Hanano team was the first to form in Aleppo City, out of locals who were already involved with the civilian side of the resistance. Surkhai and his twin brother Shahoud were among the founding members. Khaled came along soon after.

Around the same time, ARK, an international contracting firm based in Istanbul, had received a mix of U.S. and British funding intended for “non-lethal aid” to the Syrian opposition, and had identified the rescue teams as a priority. The scale of Assad's bombardment paralleled conventional wars in Europe, and ARK resurrected a Blitz-era doctrine called Civil Defense. Partnering with a Turkish organization, AKUT, that specialized in earthquake response, they established a training center in southern Turkey for the new teams. There, the boys from Hanano learned basic urban search-and-rescue techniques, along with first aid and firefighting. They were issued trucks, uniforms, and equipment, and then sent back to Syria.

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## The team investigates a massive blast site:

<http://vimeo.com/106023226>

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Their training came just in time. In the fall of last year, the momentum of the war began to shift in favor of Assad. After the regime killed over a thousand people with sarin gas on the outskirts of Damascus on August 21, 2013, and the West declined to intervene, Assad renewed his offensive. Aleppo, the linchpin city of the north, was among its key objectives. And to break the rebels' grip on the eastern half, the regime turned to a tool it had been testing in other cities: the barrel bomb.

Last November, the campaign began in earnest. Dozens of bombs rained each day and night on crowded markets and apartment buildings. In one two-week span, over five hundred people were killed, almost all of them civilians. The Hanano team worked the sites nonstop, massacre after massacre, from early morning until late at night. There was hardly time to eat.

And yet through it all, they stuck together. In the last year, only two members had quit, one at the insistence of his family. The people are waiting for us, Khaled would tell the team each time there was a blast. We know that they are waiting for us. They cited as their motto a Koranic sura: “And whoever saves a life, it will be as if he has saved all of humanity.” For all their gallows humor, they held it in earnest. They were there to stand beside the weakest and the most helpless, even at the cost of their own lives, even after losing three teammates, even after the destruction of their station. So that others might live.

**By evening, the** school was taking on some of the old station's trappings, including the collection of ratty communal sandals in the hallway. But here there was plenty of room. The guys sorted and stored the equipment in an empty classroom that still bore an ISIS decal. They cleared out a space and set up their beds in the basement, where they would be better protected from the bombardment at night. There were

more rooms, but they had grown accustomed to sleeping close together. Khaled put his desk and couch next door to the equipment room.

“It’s like a five-star hotel,” he announced.

“I still miss the old place,” sighed Surkhai.

They were sitting on the floor in their break room, watching the rebel channel Haleb al Youm, or Aleppo Today, on their beat-up TV. They had arranged the room in the Middle Eastern style, laying carpets and cushions around the perimeter in a U-shape facing the television. Despite the grim reality in the countryside, the channel stayed upbeat, playing clip after clip of the rebels firing anti-tank missiles and mortars at government positions. Then the boys recognized themselves.

“Hey, it’s us!” said Annas, and they turned the volume up. The broadcaster said that the regime had targeted and destroyed the Hanano Civil Defense station, but that no one had been injured.

“We should have told them we were all killed in the blast, then maybe Bashar would leave us alone,” said Ali.

Shahoud, the elder twin, came in with a platter of fresh vegetables and mezzes, little dishes of tapenade and hummus, along with flatbread. “You think we’re going to live a long time?” he said, slapping his belly. “We’re eating so that we don’t miss anything.” And they all tucked in.



Down time between bomb blasts.

“Listen, guys, I’m defecting,” his brother Surkhai announced, as they lit up cigarettes. He held up his phone, which had a photo of a blonde woman in a skimpy outfit posing with two regime soldiers. “Look at this girl, and look at your beard,” he said, shaking his head in disgust.

“All the hot girls are in the regime areas,” Annas said. “We just have Al Qaeda.”

“Look at us. Bashar has been sitting in a jacuzzi this whole war, fucking girls,” Surkhai moaned. “I’m so horny, but I don’t think I could even get a girl pregnant after living like this.”

“Why don’t you go fuck yourselves?” Ali suggested.



**The bomb had completely demolished an empty house and torn off the front half of the neighboring seven-story apartment building, so that you could see into people’s kitchens and bathrooms, like a dollhouse.”**

Khaled laughed shyly. He had never been with a woman. There was a girl before the war, but she had married someone else. The rest of them were similarly inexperienced; some, like Ahmed, a romantic, were engaged, but only Shahoud had his own family. The war had interrupted all their plans, and, even as it became apparent that it would not end soon, not many families wanted their daughters to marry the lunatics in Civil Defense.

Their main pastime, apart from smoking, was banter. The stronger and more tender their bond, the sharper the insults. Especially with Surkhai, the head clown of the lot. Earlier that day, he had found a tennis-sized metal ball that, when rolled on the school’s stone tiling, made a rumbling sound uncannily similar to that of a jet swooping down to strike. He’d roll it behind the guys and watch them jump.

It wasn’t easy to join such a tightly knit team. During the afternoon, a chubby, curly haired nineteen-year-old named Ammar had shown up and asked to sign up. They had a couple of openings, but Khaled was skeptical. He would give him a chance for a few weeks, and see how he handled the dead bodies and double-taps. Lots of people wanted to join, but few stayed longer than a week. He assigned Shaben, an eight-month veteran of the team who was mature beyond his 24 years, to look after the rookie. Everyone had his own nickname. Ali, who was whippet-shaped, was called Sankour, which meant something like “bum.” “Because he looks like a poor man,” Surkhai explained.



One last cigarette in the team's destroyed headquarters before moving out.

Latif, whose board shorts and mop of auburn hair gave him the appearance of a Californian surfer, was nicknamed Zawahiri, after the current head of Al Qaeda, because, well, he had sort of been involved with Al Qaeda. His two older brothers were fighting with Jabhat al Nusra, the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, and he had been a fighter with another related jihadist group. If someone asked him if he shared the group's vision for a Shariah-based state in Syria, he'd nod and smile: "Inshallah."

His parents had decided that two boys on the front lines was enough, and had forced Latif to quit. But he craved adventure, and told his parents that if he was going to die in this war, he wanted to die as a martyr. When he found out how dangerous Civil Defense was, he signed up.

"He wants to be a martyr?" said Khaled, overhearing him. He laughed incredulously. "He loves the girls!" The rest of the guys hooted in assent. "The other day, he went on a date with one in the border camp in Azaz." Not exactly proper extremist behavior.

"She's my fiancée," Latif protested, gesturing as if he were putting a ring on his finger. "My fiancée!" he repeated, over the team's laughter.

**The sound of** a helicopter swooping in woke them. Khaled pulled his blanket over his head like a surly teenager. The deafening blast was close enough that the doors slammed and a window broke. They waited for the second one, and then clambered to their feet and ran for the truck. Abu Sabet had just arrived with the morning bread run. "It's in Sakhour," he said, as they climbed in atop the still-warm stacks of flat bread and jolted off.



A civilian calls to his family members trapped inside what had been their home.

The site was just around the corner. The bomb had completely demolished an empty house and torn off the front half of the neighboring seven-story apartment building, so that you could see into people's kitchens and bathrooms, like a dollhouse. Two people had been killed, and there were women and children still trapped upstairs. The team watched from below as Ahmed and Annas climbed up an exposed staircase and brought them down with linked arms in a chair lift. The women's faces were caked white with dust, like geishas.

On the way home, Ahmed let his head rest against Annas's shoulder contentedly—it always felt good to get someone out of the rubble. It was a victory against the bombs.

Back at the station, Khaled noticed that the blast had torn his office door off its hinges. It was only their third day there. He looked to the sky. "Where do you want us to go?" he yelled to no one in particular.

**Later that morning,** Abu Sabet returned with his taxi, and Khaled decided to make the rounds of the city's stations. As operations chief for Civil Defense in all of Aleppo, Khaled was supposed to have his own car, but it had broken down and the city council had still not repaired it. He was beginning to suspect it was an intentional move by his boss, the head of Civil Defense and a political appointee named Ammar Salmo who, he believed, was jealous of his popularity.

ARK had been asking Khaled to provide a list of nominees for a new round of training, selected from among the four rescue teams and the firefighting unit in the city. Khaled had to get recommendations from each station chief, so he drove to the closest first, Bab al Nerab. When no one answered the station door, he went inside and climbed up to the second-floor office. Though it was nearly noon, the chief, Abu Rajab, was still in his pajamas and was rubbing his eyes sleepily. Khaled listed off ARK's requirements

and the number of men needed for each class — there would be a basic training course, one in heavier equipment, a medical assistance class, and finally a course in leadership. Abu Rajab listened absentmindedly without taking notes. “Okay thanks,” Khaled said, struggling to contain his annoyance.



In the new headquarters, the team placed their bunks in the basement for a more fortified night sleep.

He continued to the firefighting team down the road, which was also under Abu Rajab’s command. There he found a former protégé, who poured him some cola in a paper cup. Khaled sipped as he listened to him vent about his boss. The protégé had been a firefighter before the war, and knew his job.

“He says to me, ‘If you don’t like it, go work with Hanano.’”

Khaled shook his head. “What about the radio?” Several radios at the Bab al Nerab station had gone missing.

“He says that someone stole it from his home.”

“He’s selling the radio, that’s what it means.” Khaled sighed. Petty corruption was becoming more and more of a problem. Before Civil Defense had been purely volunteer work, but now they were getting salaries from the city council.

“Tomorrow, I’ll send you someone good from my team to help, Okay?” Khaled said, patting him on the knee. “If this guy” — he meant Abu Rajab — “doesn’t work, we’ll kick him out.” He finished his cola. “Maybe we’ll have to kick a lot of people out.”

Khaled walked outside and lit a cigarette. His talk of kicking people out was just bluster. In the beginning, after getting training from ARK, he had helped set up the other teams in Aleppo, and had been the de

facto leader for the city, with authority over the equipment and personnel decisions. But then the Civil Defense program had been integrated into the local government, which was in turn, in theory, integrated into the Syrian National Council, the rebel government-in-exile. This was what the Western donors wanted, even though the national council was, as far as Khaled and the team were concerned, a bunch of corrupt politicians sitting in five-star hotels in Turkey. When the city council arbitrarily decided that the head of Civil Defense had to have a college degree, they picked the well-connected Ammar over Khaled.



A wounded member of Civil Defense awaits news on a his teammate's condition inside a makeshift hospital.

Ammar had appointed his own cronies, like the lazy Abu Rajab. He disliked Khaled, but couldn't get rid of him. Khaled had too much moral authority. When the three men from the Hanano team had been killed on an operation, the city council had refused to keep paying their salaries to their families. Khaled and the guys had marched in the streets with signs; Ammar and the other teams had refused to join them. But the Civil Defense teams were extremely popular, especially Hanano, and, embarrassed by the media coverage of the protest, the council had been forced to pay the salaries out.

Khaled knew he had to exercise what influence he could through his network of protégés who were spread among the city's teams. There was nothing he could do about the fact that the city council was ineffective and corrupt, and completely beholden to the various armed rebel groups that controlled the city. As the war had gone on, he thought, the revolution had changed, and had become about power and extreme views of religion. As if to prove the point, as he stood in front of the fire station, a red fire truck cruised slowly by. It was much larger and nicer than his, and the three heavysset men in the cab were wearing civilian clothes and had large, fan-shaped beards and shaved mustaches. It was Jabhat al Nusra, the local Al Qaeda affiliate. They had their own fire brigade, and the city council gave them the best of the donated equipment. Seeing Khaled's uniform, the men smiled and waved. He dragged on his cigarette and returned the gesture half-heartedly.

**When Khaled drove** around his city with Abu Sabet, he saw it in terms of a new geography inflicted by the war, one that had almost come to obscure the memories of life before, one whose landmarks were the sites of massacres and improbable rescues. It was not just physical destruction that the regime was after, Khaled thought, but the destruction of living communities. Whole neighborhoods in the rebel-held side of the city were abandoned now. When he asked people why, in spite of everything, they had stayed, he found three kinds of answers. Either they were too poor to leave, or they were too stubborn to abandon their homes. Or else they had become fatalistic, thinking that their appointed hour would come whether in Aleppo or in the refugee camps. The desperate and the mad. But regardless, he swore to them, Civil Defense would be the last to leave.



The catacombs of Aleppo.

Had there ever been a war like this in history, he wondered? They said that nearly two hundred thousand Syrians had died so far. Another nine million had fled their homes. Why had God allowed these things to happen? Perhaps it was a test. He thought of his diaries, which he had left behind in his family home. Growing up as a middle child of 17—his father had three wives—he hadn't had many opportunities, but he had taught himself history and poetry. After graduating high school, he had tried to enroll in college but soon dropped out to earn a living, teaching in a little vocational school that trained nurses and electricians. At night, he would often write in his diary, puzzling over what the future had in store in him, trying to answer the question: What should I become? The war had been his answer.

Life in Aleppo had become like the concrete dust that coated each blast site, as monochrome as a dream. The rubble he worked in was churned and uniform, like food from a stomach. Where there had once been a building with distinct parts, with painted doors and windows and balconies, and inside them chairs and tables and cupboards, the constituents of a person's home, now they had to strain to see objects among the grayish mass: a twisted ceiling fan, the edge of a mattress, a woman's shoe. The dust colors everything, colors the light from the evening sky, colors the hair of the rescuers, colors the metallic taste

in their throats, lies like snow upon the neighbors' window frames, lies on the eyelashes that fluttered in stunned beats, and as the night comes upon them, the dust seems to descend and thicken with the darkness.

There was no electricity, and the city was pitch black now, the stars bright above. On either side of Khaled and Abu Sabet, the desolate, bombed-out blocks stretched out into the night like catacombs. A few generator-powered corners passed like islands; drivers kept their headlights off for fear of attracting the jets. Abu Sabet crept along in the darkness through the familiar streets, sensing potholes and wrecks before they were visible, flicking his lights occasionally as a blind man sweeps his cane. It was like gliding in a submarine along the bottom of the sea.

**It had been** another sleepless night in the basement of the school. Latif, the Al Qaeda fanboy, had gone to bed with a pop song endlessly looping on his phone. The shelling had been particularly loud and intense, but worse still were the famished mosquitoes. The first bombs at dawn were almost a relief. The team, led by Surkhai, one of the twins, pulled on their clothes and ran upstairs to the truck, breakfasting on cigarettes as they rattled through Aleppo's broken streets. For once Surkhai, the team jester, was silent. It was the fifth day in the new station.



They found the site down a narrow side street. A bomb had come sailing down in the clear morning air and struck a small apartment building, partially collapsing it. Most of the extended family who lived there had made it out and were standing anxiously in the street. There were two sisters in headscarves holding each other and weeping; men were digging angrily at the rubble. Surkhai got down from the truck and ran up to an old man, still in his pajamas, who was powdered with dust. "There are two boys trapped inside," he said.

According to the training they received in Turkey, the rescue technique they chose depended the kind of structure and the degree to which it had collapsed. When multi-level concrete buildings fail—whether from a bomb strike or an earthquake—its floors tend to pancake on top of each other, crushing those

inside. However, small spaces will often remain around columns, stairwells, or pieces of heavy furniture, allowing people to survive. The key was to get to them in time, without getting caught by a further collapse of the building.

The first step was to locate the victims. The family knew that the kids had been in their bedrooms, sleeping, so the team had an idea of where they should be.



Civilians and Free Syrian Army fighters search for survivors.

Now there were two possible approaches. The first was known as a horizontal rescue, where the team tunnels parallel to the floor layers, shoring with pieces of wood as they went. The second was a vertical rescue, where they would dig from either above or below to the victim. In this case, the team went for both approaches simultaneously. Surkhai went into a one-room shop on the ground floor of the building and started smashing at its back wall with a pick. Meanwhile, whippet-skinny Ali got up on top of the rubble pile and, aided by the boys' father, started digging downward toward where the bedroom had been.

The old man and the women stood in the street, watching helplessly as the men swarmed atop the pile that had been their home. They were simple tailors who were trying to eke out a living in Aleppo. Why should they leave their homes for Bashar al Assad?

At the top of the pile, Ali could hear the sound of the little boys' voices calling for help, and they redoubled their efforts. The closer they got to their target, the slower they went, even as the pressure mounted—a frantic search turned archeological excavation. Smaller chunks of concrete were picked away, larger ones levered free, webs of rusted rebar were sawed in half. Finally, they opened a hole through the floor, and there they were: The brothers crouched down by their beds, chalk-white but seemingly unharmed. It was as if they had been etched back into the world.



## **Shaben had been hit in the torso. An x-ray showed five pieces of shrapnel lodged in the body.”**

Ali and Surkhai carried the children down to a waiting ambulance. Their mother ran to them, sobbing in relief at a kind of second birth. Watching the reunion, even Surkhai got a lump in his throat.

The team returned to the station elated. But there was only time for a cup of tea before a second call came in—the firefighting team needed their help. This time, Khaled came along. They drove into the narrow streets of the old city, where a blaze was sending up pillars of black smoke. An incendiary round fired by a regime sniper had ignited the stocks of dry goods in the basement of a shop. The fire squad, led by Khaled’s friend, was struggling to put it out. Their pump wasn’t working properly. Ahmed, the former firefighter, put on coveralls and started helping.

Then Khaled caught something over the radio. There was a bombing across town, but he couldn’t make out the rest of the message—the signal was terrible as usual. They ran back to the truck and headed in that direction, but as they passed through the central rebel market, a little yellow taxi careened toward them. It was their driver, Abu Sabet.

“The guys were hit!” he shouted. “They’re in the hospital.”

As Abu Sabet wheeled around, the truck charged forward to the hospital just down the street, where several of the Civil Defense guys were standing outside, pacing and smoking. Some of them were in tears. Ammar, the rookie, was caked in dust, a rivulet of blood running down his temple.

“What happened?” Khaled demanded.

“We were getting water when the helicopter came,” he said. “We tried to run for cover but the bomb came too close. I’m okay, but Shaben...”

Khaled looked toward the hospital, his face ashen. “Go home,” he said.

“I want to stay,” Ammar replied.

Khaled marched into the hospital. It was all that remained of the big one around the corner, Dar al Shifa, which had been infamously bombed by the regime the year before. The surviving doctors and nurses had moved into a little indoor shopping mall, with beds for patients set up in the tiny shops. Shaben, who had been looking after the rookie, was shirtless and hooked up to an IV bag, his torso and head bloody and bandaged. A doctor was taping the gauze on his forehead.



A critically injured volunteer is treated for shrapnel wounds.

“Ya Khaled, ya Khaled,” he croaked weakly, seeing his leader standing above him.

“It’s okay,” Khaled said, squeezing his hand.

Shaben had been hit in the torso. An x-ray showed five pieces of shrapnel lodged in his body. He had been lucky that none had hit a vital artery or organ. He would have to go to Turkey for the operation to get them removed. Khaled made the arrangements for Shaben to be evacuated and then he and the guys returned to the station, where they collapsed into chairs in the hallway. No one made any jokes.

“Where were you? We were looking for you,” said Shahoud, who still had Shaben’s blood on his pants.

Khaled cradled his head and ran his hands through his hair.

“It’s the damn radio tower,” continued Shahoud. “We heard the helicopters coming, we tried to radio them and tell them to save themselves, but they didn’t hear us.”



An X-ray image of the team member's lungs, showing shards of shrapnel.

Khaled could feel his anger boiling over. How many times had they asked the city council to fix their damn radio tower? Were they just supposed to keep risking their lives until all of their crappy equipment finally broke? Those assholes at the council were playing politics and stuffing their pockets while his men were getting hurt. "Ali, write this down, we're going to put it on Facebook," he said. "The reason the guys were injured was because the tower doesn't work well. Two guys were injured while they were out. For a year, we've said we need a good tower!"

Ali's pen scratched in the silence. Khaled thought of Ammar, the rookie. He hadn't even been registered with the team and had already been injured. Well, he was one of them now. Then Khaled remembered that there was a big meeting that day in the countryside, between the local councils and the Civil Defense team leaders from around the rebel-held north. It would have been a good chance to raise his profile and play politics. Exactly the kind of shit he hated. "Fuck those guys," said Khaled. And he laughed bitterly.



**Most nights, when** Ahmed the firefighter walked out into the courtyard of the station, he could lift his lanky arm and pick out the “W” of Cassiopeia. The stars would be bright in the cloudless sky, the same stars that people in North America would see six hours later. The central star of the W, Gamma Cassiopeia, was his star. Down and to the right was Alpha Cassiopeia, her star. And Caph, a giant 54 light years distant, was the star of their love.

He kept a photo of his fiancée on his phone: she looked demure in a headscarf but had a glint of humor in her eyes. Now she was stuck on the regime-held side of the city, where at least it was safer. So they messaged each other on Facebook, and Skyped.

All the guys imagined a better life after the war, but none knew when it would end. Khaled had a feeling it would be a long war. He wondered what would be left of his country by the time it ended. Somehow the revolution had gone horribly wrong. Could anyone really say that the rebels or the regime were in the right anymore? The world had turned its back on them, that much was clear.

And yet the simple stoicism that drove the team’s rescue work did not allow them to believe that their cause was futile. Surely God would grant them victory, though ISIS and the regime had nearly surrounded Aleppo. In the meantime, their youth and courage would protect them, if not from destruction, then from despair. They were living the war with more emotion than they would ever feel again in their lives. In its wild moments, it exalted the senses higher than any drug or love affair, and in its mundane, it hardened the bonds of friendship until they seemed stronger than the bombs that fell from the sky. And even if the boys of Civil Defense were among the testosterone-and-adrenaline junkies getting their kicks on Syria’s front lines, at least they were innocent of the stain of taking human life. Perhaps that protected them. As they saved others, they saved themselves.



It had been a long day, and they were settling into another night of bombardment. They could already hear the jets and helicopters roaring busily about, and the shelling on the front line. But until the call came, they would unwind in their favorite way, smoking, crunching salted pumpkin seeds, and goofing off. They lounged around the rec room, Khaled with his head on the family man Shahoud's bare, hairy shoulder as he popped nuts into his mouth. Ali, the one they called Sankour, or bum, lay in the corner, stroking his mullet. The single twin, Surkhai, had a bongo that he beat like he was dusting a carpet. Latif, still wearing his board shorts, played Arabic pop songs on his phone while they sang along, and then he and Ahmed got up and did the kind of dance popular at weddings, linking arms and bouncing and kicking their legs out in time in the small room. Surkhai let out a long wolf whistle, while the others laughed giddily.

Shaking his head at the racket, Khaled cursed at them. "Sharmouta al defa al madani!" he shouted. "Civil Defense whores!" But he smiled.

They started singing their own chants as Surkhai slapped the bongo arrhythmically. They ululated, they shrieked in laughter, they ad-libbed doggerel at Ali:

Ya Sankour, you like who, who likes you?  
You're lovely for a million, you!

And then, subtly at first, beneath the mockery and horseplay, beneath the pent-up youth and sexual energy, there came a keener note, a hoarser, wilder, rising edge to their singing that expressed limitless grief and a mad joy to live at once. And the song's lyrics changed, and they were calling for a blessing on their lost country, a plea for God to one day bring back Aleppo's schools, its factories, its parks, its people, invoking the names of its shattered neighborhoods with the defiant cadence of a battle cry:

Aleppo, may God let you win!  
Seif al Dowla and Salahuddin.

And they raised their voices in song and beat the drum until the planes could no longer be heard in the sky.



To learn more about the boys from Civil Defense, visit [whitehelmets.org](http://whitehelmets.org)

*This story was written by **Matthieu Aikins**. It was edited by **Mike Benoist**, fact-checked by **Taylor Beck**, and copy-edited by **Lawrence Levi**. Photographs and video by **Sebastiano Tomada**.*

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