

Illustrator draws out Syrian life under Islamic State rule

BY CORINNE SEGAL September 24, 2015 at 2:49 PM EST



A scene from the Bustan Al-Qasr neighborhood of Aleppo. Illustration by Molly Crabapple

Daily life in Syria is a mystery to many Americans. Since the Syrian civil war began, access within the country has been increasingly difficult for foreign reporters and humanitarian aid, especially since the rise of the Islamic State in the region.

Illustrator Molly Crabapple wanted to capture the scenes of life amid war that often go unreported in Iraq and Syria, where the Islamic State has captured territory. Crabapple began working with Marwan Hisham, a writer who works under a pseudonym, to obtain images from Iraq and Syria via cellphone on which Crabapple could base a set of illustrations. The pair published a piece in Vanity Fair this summer [on life in Aleppo](#), a city to which Hisham returned this year for the first time since 2012.

While Crabapple was working on a project about Doctors Without Borders at a refugee camp in Domeez, Iraq, she and Hisham explained via email how they go about illustrating war.

Molly, for how long have you been illustrating war scenes, and what began the Syrian war series?

Illustrating war grew from illustrating protest. In 2011, I had a [close view of Occupy Wall Street](#), and in 2012, I did a book with Laurie Penny called “[Discordia](#)” on the Greek financial crisis and anti-austerity protests. “Discordia” taught me to draw riot cops, demos and blood in the streets. Later, my body of work grew to include child fighters, migrant workers, prisoners, bombed out buildings, in places like Guantanamo Bay, Turkey, Abu Dhabi Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Gaza and Palestine.

Marwan and I began working together in the summer of 2014, right before the U.S. began bombing Raqqa. I got the idea because areas under ISIS control are off-limits to journalists. While very brave locals get photos out, they are taken surreptitiously, not with the craft a photojournalist could bring. I wanted to get out images from an ISIS area, and invest them with the beauty and clarity art can give. I was so honored Marwan chose to work with me, and we’ve since done two more pieces, from Aleppo and Mosul.

“People live lives, even in war zones. Sometimes, when we just see photos of atrocity, we forget that these are humans in that atrocity, who scam and love and watch satellite TV and buy vegetables at the market and love their kids.”



What has your process for those illustrations been, and how do you decide which scenes to illustrate?

Marwan sends me cellphone photos that I then use pen, ink and watercolor to illustrate.

Marwan and I choose the scenes together, trying to create images that show Syria is more than the cliché of rubble and fighters.

What are the challenges of illustrating scenes from the Syrian war from afar?

This is the first time I've ever worked primarily from someone else's photos, and I always feel very through a glass darkly.



Fighters from the Islamist group Fastaqim Kama Umert. Illustration by Molly Crabapple

Right now, you're in Domeez documenting the lives of refugees. Can you talk about some of your experiences working there?

I'm immensely lucky to have been brought to Domeez by Doctors Without Borders to document their work in the camp. They do fine, vital work but the camp itself is a wasteland of heat and powercuts and dust storms, with nearly every family I spoke to either longing to, or actively planning to go to Europe.



Illustration by Molly Crabapple

I saw you had [tweeted about Abdulbadi Suliman](#), a graphic designer producing art in Domeez. Have you met any other Syrian artists working in refugee camps?

Abdulbadi is the only artist I got to know in Domeez, but Castle Art is an incredible project in Akre Camp, Iraqi Kurdistan, where young Syrian artists paint murals. Check out [this beauty](#).



The remains of the Ayn Jalut elementary school in Aleppo, which was bombed on April 30, 2014. Illustration by Molly Crabapple

Your illustrations are unique from the graphic photos and video that depict much of the Syrian war and refugee crisis in the news. What do you want to add to representations of war?

People live lives, even in war zones. Sometimes, when we just see photos of atrocity, we forget that these are humans in that atrocity, who scam and love and watch satellite TV and buy

vegetables at the market and love their kids. Me and Marwan tried to show daily life, real life, of which war was a part but not the whole.

A question for Marwan: What do you want the world to know about recent events in Syria?

Living under ISIS rule doesn't necessarily mean you are pro-ISIS. It's absolutely the same for people who are living under the government or rebels' territories. Many people don't have the money to leave and the world has been hard on judging them. I always felt committed to give them a voice.



A scene from the Tallat Al-Zarazeer district in Aleppo. Illustration by Molly Crabapple



