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Daycare for the displaced

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Andrew Hirsh



Millions of Syrian children have lived their entire lives in war. At The Wisdom House, a kindergarten displaced along with its staff and pupils from Idlib to Aleppo, Moumena and her colleagues attempt the colossal task of providing for these children's educational and emotional needs.

The children poured into the heated shelter of Moumena's classroom, escaping the chill of late winter in northwestern Syria. It was 8 March, 2018. There had never been a true

sense of normalcy at The Wisdom House, a kindergarten founded mid-war in the city of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, but on this morning, a familiar, joyful routine began anew. School was back in session at last.



Children at The Wisdom House

The previous December, as the sun rose on Christmas Day, the Bashar al-Assad regime and its allies launched an offensive across much of Idlib Province, including Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, one of the province's largest cities. The death toll quickly mounted. With no indication the assault would cease, The Wisdom House shut its doors and civilians fled, heading further north toward safer terrain.

Airstrikes and shelling pummeled the area for nearly two months. When the fighting moved elsewhere, people gradually returned, many discovering nothing but rubble where their homes once stood. The Wisdom House reopened, and Moumena—the school’s English teacher—checked in with each student on that first day back, grateful to find all were in good health. Morale was high, too: their tales of displacement were not tearful, but threaded with intrigue, excitement, even joy. They talked of their travels in great detail, as if they’d embarked on a grand adventure. They described all the new friends they made along the way. These perspectives, these pinholes of light only the young can point out in the darkness of war, are what bring Moumena peace, she says.

After hugs and stories abound, the students shuffled behind rows of long desks, three or four to a bench, cutouts of English letters surrounding them on the concrete walls. Moumena began her lesson. This, she felt, was how she was meant to resist: by supporting her community’s most vulnerable; by doing her part, circumstances be damned, to brighten Syria’s future.

“That was the most beautiful day of my life,” Moumena tells Al-Jumhuriya.

Established in 2016, The Wisdom House has welcomed hundreds of students, many of them internally displaced from elsewhere in Syria. This author came to learn of it via the Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF), a US-based non-profit organization that supports the school financially. The stories herein are the product of extensive phone interviews with Moumena between October 2019 and February 2020, supplemented with photographic and video

documentation.



Children at The Wisdom House

Like many schools in Syria today, The Wisdom House has faced an array of steep challenges. Soon after it opened, as aerial bombardments began targeting schools and hospitals, classes had to move into a clandestine basement. While its funding is sufficient to enroll more than 100 kindergarteners at a time, it lacks the resources to support every local child in need of an education.

Also difficult is handling four- and five-year-olds who, despite their innocence, are not shielded from the anguish of war. Most students at the kindergarten have lost at least one parent; many are orphans. Some have been injured by the attacks that stole their loved ones. The trauma they've endured is hard to fathom, and it often resurfaces at school.

Noises from nearby fighting—roars of engines overhead, cracks of gunfire, missiles pounding the soil—can send them into a panic. So can rolls of thunder, or a loudly slammed door.

Caring for such fragile boys and girls is a profound responsibility, one Moumena says she embraces. She wants her classroom to be a safe haven, so she fills it with songs and games that keep children relaxed and focused on English, not on the terrors around them and in their minds. This has endeared Moumena to the students. They relish in telling her secrets, giggling as their tiny hands cup her ear. They make her gifts and ask her to visit their homes. When girls want her to braid their hair, she gladly runs her fingers through their locks and weaves them together. Some love showing her their new clothes, and when they do, Moumena makes sure to tell them how beautiful they look.

Like many children their age, they tend to be straightforward about their feelings—a trait Moumena adores. Once, as class drew to a close, a child whose mother recently died walked up to her and said, “Teacher, I really love you.”

“In that moment,” Moumena recalls, “I felt as if, for the time being, I was able to replace the mother she had lost in the war. I try to take care of every student individually. I give them all the care and attention I would if they were my own sons or daughters. I never ignore or look away from any student, because to me, every student is my daughter or son, and I wish for them the happiest life, away from the horrible conditions of war.”

Unfortunately, those conditions have only deteriorated.

Fighting shut down the kindergarten for several months last August, and, tragically, an airstrike during that upswell killed a former student. His name was Ahmad. He loved math, and had a knack for making his teachers laugh. He was eight years old.

In November, as the Assad regime made advances across Idlib, the school had to shut down a third time. This incursion was different: longer, fiercer. Moumena and her family hid in a basement as bombs fell from 7:30 in the morning until 8:00 at night, the foundation above them rumbling as explosives and shrapnel erupted across the neighborhood. Ultimately, Moumena, her husband, and their parents fled to a rebel-held pocket in the western countryside of Aleppo. Escaping was the right decision: in January, the regime retook Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, leveling most buildings in the process, all but ensuring many residents would never return.



Bombardment in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man

“When we left our [city], our souls remained in it,” Moumena says. “We couldn’t eat or drink for about two days as we traveled. How could we, when [we had left] our homes, where we spent all of our lives, where we laughed, and were happy?”

Getting out of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man was necessary, but it didn't lead them out of harm's way. Upon reaching the Aleppan countryside, they saw the regime set its sights there, too.

“If you could only hear the airplanes as they're about to shoot their missiles, your heart would drop out of your chest from fear of the sound,” Moumena says. “When it launches its missiles, it's as if it's coming directly for the place you're

sitting in. There's nothing for you to do. You can do nothing except find a wall and put your back to it, or wait by a strong foundation in the house and make your last prayers."

Worse, Moumena adds, was when she'd hear a helicopter drop a barrel bomb. A dark blemish cut against the sky. A whistle grew from a soft buzz to an ear-splitting shriek. The view from the ground gave the impression it was tumbling right on top of her, the force of gravity directing it straight for her head.

"[That view] is probably more terrifying than when it explodes," she says. "Then you see the huge explosion. You see the dirt and the smoke completely surrounding you from every direction, and you have nothing to do except call around and ask, 'Where's my father? Where's my mother?' The only things that come to mind are all the things that are most dear to your heart, the things you love the most."

This onslaught forced Moumena and her family to seek refuge for the second time in a matter of weeks. Eventually, they arrived in Turkish-controlled territory in the northern countryside of Aleppo. The sounds of war are fainter here, but many hardships remain.

Moumena, her husband, and her husband's parents found lodging in the town of Azaz, but Moumena's parents could not; for now, they are staying in al-Bab, some sixty kilometers to the southeast. The physical separation is rough, as is Moumena's living situation: she and her husband are packed into a two-room house filled with more than twenty people. The entire region is overflowing with

displaced civilians, not only from Idlib, but from Hama and Homs, Daraa and Damascus.

Moumena is doing what she can to persevere. Several of her colleagues from the kindergarten also arrived in Azaz, and in February, determined to do what they could to aid local children, they secured a new building and resumed classes. 26 children attended on the first day, including some from the old location in Idlib.



Children at The Wisdom House's new location in Aleppo Province

Work helps, but Moumena remains haunted by all she's faced, and weighed down by the growing layers of suffering she's carried since 2011. It is taxing to process nearly a

decade of catastrophes, each year somehow bleaker than the last. Looking back to the months when revolution swept through Syria, Moumena could not have imagined this reality: displaced; her country in ruins; caring for children who have never known peace.

When the Arab Spring first reached Syria in March 2011, Moumena was studying English at a university in Homs. Her goal was to become a translator. Then Bashar al-Assad countered dissent with an iron fist, and, as Homs fell under siege, civilians with means dispersed. For the first of many times, she and her husband considered the pros and cons of fleeing.

Staying put meant preserving the chance to finish her degree, which would help her gain full English fluency and the qualifications needed to meet her professional ambitions. Leaving, though, meant safety from the bullets, the bombs, the raids. They chose to leave and headed for Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, Moumena's hometown.

There, Moumena found the revolution alive and well. On the day she and her husband returned, residents filled the streets, clapping and chanting and waving flags, yearning for change, hoping for freedom. The authorities responded with fury. Perched on a bridge near the town's entrance, snipers fired onto the crowd, sending civilians scattered in all directions. (While many sustained injuries, no lives were lost.) Undaunted, protesters gathered daily, and Moumena, enraptured by the spirit of the uprising, eagerly joined.

"The beginning of the revolution was truly an honorable one in every sense of the word," she says. "For me personally, I hated the regime, because it was putting handcuffs on what

we could do in terms of expressing our own religion. As a Muslim, they would force me to take my veil off when I entered university. Also, once I entered high school, I was forced to join the Baath Party against my will.”

Yet the transformation Moumena sought didn't arrive. Instead, regime violence surged. Rebels took up arms. The Free Syrian Army fractured. Protesters started limiting demonstrations to once a week, then once a month. Many schools shuttered. With her English language skills and desire to work, Moumena tried tutoring and discovered she had a gift for assisting children. She earned a strong reputation throughout town—not only for her teaching acumen, but also the passionate, empathetic way she fostered connections with students. The way she made each one feel like her own.

When The Wisdom House sought an English instructor for its new kindergarten, locals recommended Moumena, knowing she'd be a natural fit.

Supporting these kids—seeing to their emotional needs, providing an education to those who would otherwise not receive one—is a heroic and Herculean achievement. It also comes at a cost. In addition to the personal strife the bloodshed has inflicted on Moumena, the students' pain—pain that can never be fully alleviated—is agonizing to witness.

“It's important to remember that we all need emotional support and therapy, including me,” she says. “All of us, young and old.”

During the offensive that began on Christmas Day 2017, Besan, a recent Wisdom House graduate, was home when a

bomb struck her family's roof. Moumena was still in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and, upon learning the news, went searching for the girl. Moumena found her alive, but grief-stricken: the explosion had killed her uncle and three-year-old brother.

Attempting to process such tragedies is to navigate a winding labyrinth that may have no exit. The horror, the exhaustion, the despair—laced together, these emotions can break anyone's resolve. As she does now, Moumena kept hope alive by focusing on her work. By using her power to give Syrians robbed of their childhood a better shot at happiness and success.

Shortly after Moumena found Besan, the fighting moved elsewhere, civilians came back, and, on 8 March, The Wisdom House reopened. That morning, Moumena returned to the classroom and prepared a lesson, anxious to reunite with the children—with her children, her sons and daughters. Maybe one would bring her a present. Some might want to show off their new shirts, or whisper secrets to her, or simply say, "I love you." Moumena could hear their voices and footsteps as they descended into the school. She didn't know how much longer they'd have together; such is life in the middle of war. What she did know, however, was she'd treasure every second they had.

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