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The Boy Who Stood Up to Syrian Injustice
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More than one million Syrian children are now refugees, many living in camps, missing out on school.

MAFRAQ, Jordan — AS in the fairy tale, in Syria it was the children who pointed out that the emperor had no clothes.

Syria’s civil war began in March 2011 with demands for freedom from schoolchildren in the provincial town of Dara’a — kids like Muhammad, a skinny seventh grader. He still hasn’t recovered from the torture he endured, and he and his parents asked that his last name not be published.

Muhammad, now part of the growing Syrian refugee diaspora in Jordan, still weighs less than 100 pounds and looks like a shy middle schooler. It’s hard to imagine him confronting a playground bully, let alone the nation’s tyrant.

Maybe the story of these children's courage can help build spine in world leaders, who for two and a half years have largely averted their eyes from the humanitarian catastrophe that is Syria. The agreement on chemical weapons may be a genuine step forward, but it does not seem particularly relevant to Syrians suffering from more banal methods of mass murder.

Muhammad was not a part of the first group of child activists, who scrawled anti-government graffiti on a wall in Dara'a. The government, with knee-jerk brutality, arrested and tortured them.

That's when other citizens, Muhammad included, poured out on the streets to demand the students' release. The authorities opened fire on some protesters and arrested others, including Muhammad. Police officers beat the boy, then just 11 years old, with rubber hoses; he says that even when the soles of his feet were whipped, he didn't divulge the names of activist schoolmates.

After four days, Muhammad's father, Adnan, paid a \$1,000 bribe to get the boy freed. The father and mother say that they warned the boy not to protest because his activities could get his father fired from his job.

Muhammad defied his parents and marked his 12th birthday by continuing to protest. At one demonstration, police detained him and clubbed him with the butt of a rifle until his knee was shattered.

A doctor, Kathem Abazeid, treated Muhammad and others injured by security forces. The secret police later executed Dr. Abazeid for treating protesters, the family says.

Muhammad also faced a more mundane challenge: How could he take his seventh-grade final exams without getting arrested when he showed up for them? His school principal sympathized and arranged for Muhammad to take the exams secretly; the principal was later executed as well, the family says.

By now, Muhammad's parents were so repulsed by the government's brutality that they shifted positions. "At this point, we started siding with our son," Adnan says.

When the security forces couldn't find Muhammad to arrest him, according to the family, they punished his parents by burning down the family home, with all their possessions inside. They also detained Adnan, who says interrogators suspended him for nine days by his wrists, broke his arm and several ribs, and tortured him with electric shocks.

What kept Adnan from revealing his son's location were thoughts of another boy detained in Dara'a: Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, 13. When Hamza's body was returned to his parents, it had burn marks and smashed kneecaps, and it had been sexually mutilated.

So despite unbearable pain, Adnan gave up nothing; a father's love prevailed over unbearable torture. When he was released after six weeks, the family fled to Jordan.

The International Rescue Committee has been helping Muhammad and his family. The family has medical records documenting the abuse, and both Adnan and Muhammad still suffer from their injuries.

These days, Muhammad is one of one million Syrian child refugees abroad, according to the United Nations. Like most of them, he doesn't attend school. Children like him, uneducated and unskilled, will constitute a Syrian lost generation.

Neda Radwan, a psychologist for the International Rescue Committee, counsels the refugees and sees constant signs of survivor torment.

"I've tried art therapy with the children," she said. "They refuse to draw anything but dead bodies."

She showed me some of the drawings. They brim with bombs and blood, windows into the minds of children overwhelmed by violence.

I fear we're heading down an unspeakable path: a war in Syria that may continue for years and claim hundreds of thousands of lives, the risk of the collapse of King Abdullah's government in Jordan, and growing spillover of violence in Lebanon and Iraq.

There are no simple fixes to the Syrian tragedy, but there are steps we can take that might help. We can bolster moderate rebel groups with weapons, training and intelligence. Like many Syrians, I favor missile strikes on President Bashar al-Assad's air force to reduce his capacity to bomb civilians, although few Americans agree with me. Certainly we can push much harder for humanitarian access to aid needy Syrians. We can also do more to educate refugee children like Muhammad.

Above all, let's not just shrug and move on. If a scrawny seventh grader can stand up to a despot, so can we.

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