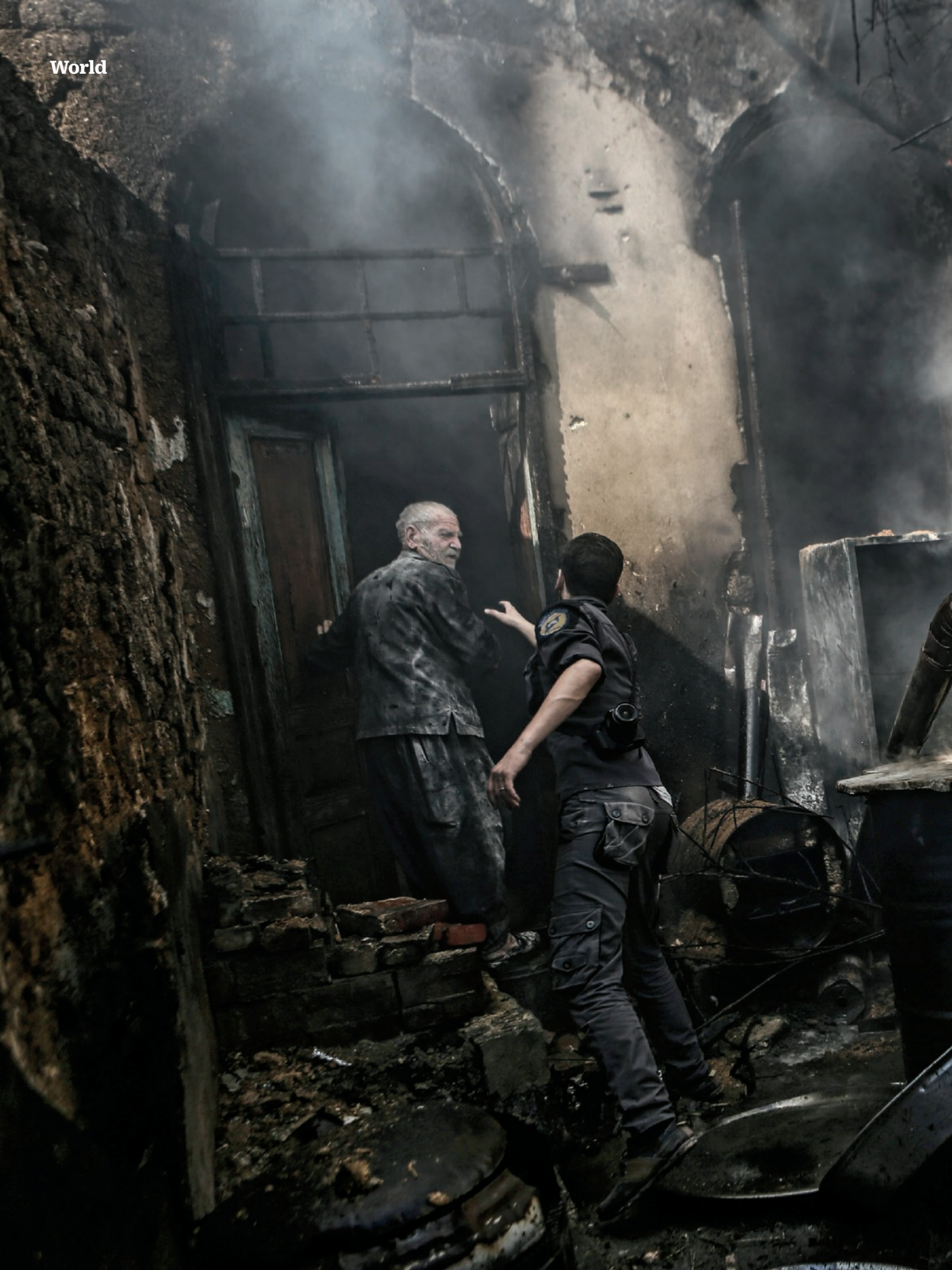
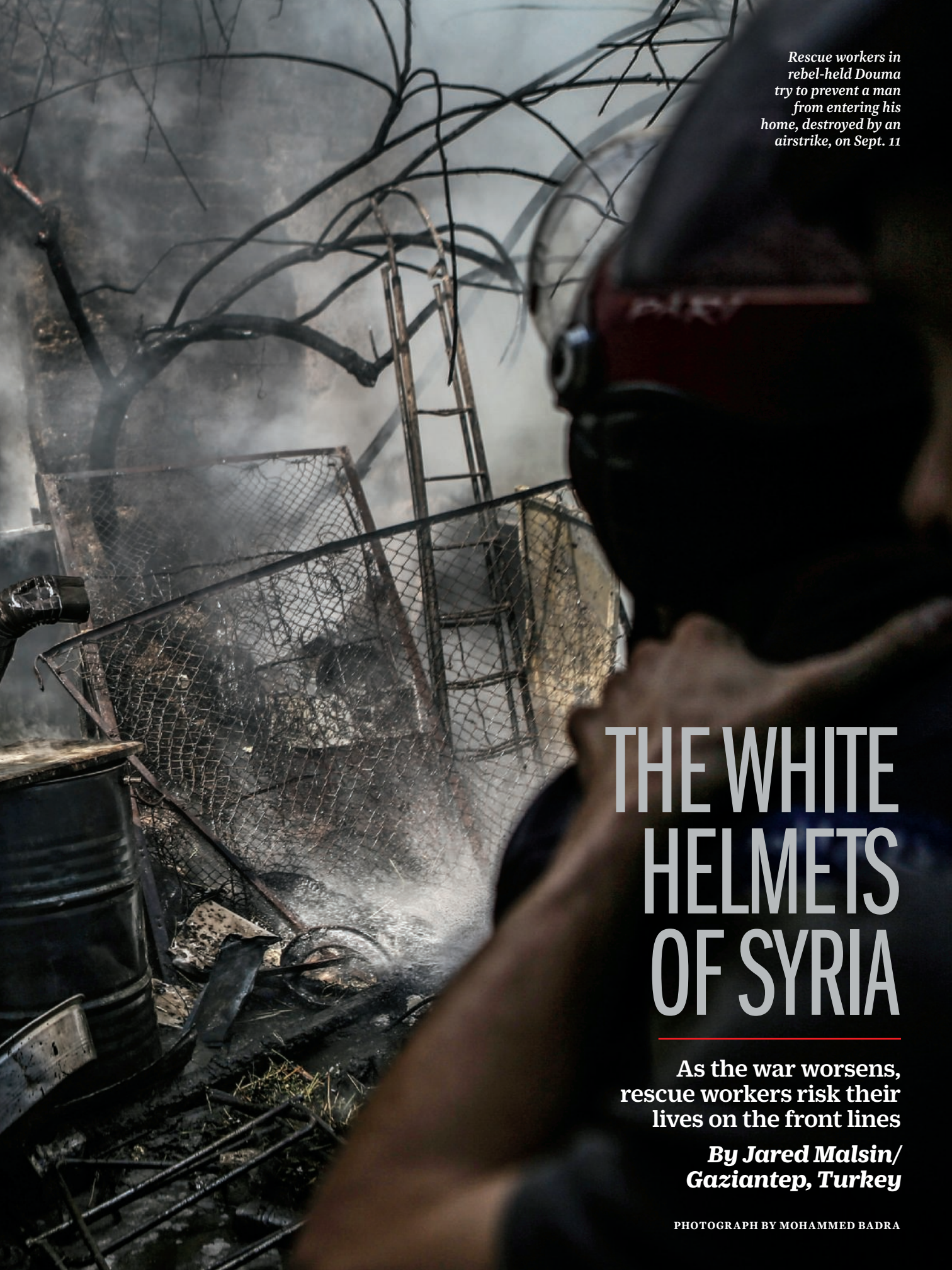




Rescue workers in rebel-held Douma try to prevent a man from entering his home, destroyed by an airstrike, on Sept. 11

THE WHITE HELMETS OF SYRIA

As the war worsens, rescue workers risk their lives on the front lines

By Jared Malsin/ Gaziantep, Turkey

PHOTOGRAPH BY MOHAMMED BADRA

IN SYRIA, IT'S BEEN ALL TOO EASY TO LOSE THE PLOT. THINGS BEGAN SIMPLY ENOUGH, ANOTHER PROMISING BUD IN THE ARAB SPRING—ORDINARY CITIZENS MARCHING PEACEFULLY AGAINST A MIDDLE EASTERN DESPOT.

It was a heart-lifting display, maybe a bit tardy after the movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya, but you certainly knew whom to cheer for. The good guys were in plain sight, chanting "Freedom" and "Peace" from orderly rows. Until the government forces opened fire.

But as the crowds scattered for cover and, before long, took up arms themselves, what steadily enveloped the conflict was not so much the fog of war as its miasma. Opposition to the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad shattered into more than 1,000 armed groups. The most successful gathered under the banner of jihadism, either al-Qaeda or eventually ISIS, its even more repugnant spin-off. There's nothing to like there. Then the neighbors started in, sending guns or money or troops—Iran, Russia, Hizballah, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and finally the U.S.

All wars produce confusion—for chaos, nothing else comes close—but even the most brutal contests produce a glimmer of hope, or at least some sense of what is driving people to put their lives on the line. Yet to outsiders, 5½ years of revolution and war in Syria might appear to have produced mostly villains, along with refugees and numbing images of suffering on a blasted landscape that recalls Stalingrad.

Enter the White Helmets. Ordinary Syrians emerged from the dust that hangs over the rubble of cities like Aleppo, double-timing it into some of the most dangerous places on earth to do what the world has refused to do—save Syrian lives.

In a war that seemed to have no one to pull for, here was Khaled Omar retrieving a 10-day-old baby from the boulders that had been his mother's home, still alive after hours beneath the rubble. (Omar would live only another year; he was killed by a mortar this August.) Here was an unnamed rescuer setting Omran Daqneesh into the bright orange seat in the back of an ambulance, encased in powdery grit and shock after yet another an airstrike. And here, safe and sound in New York City, was Raed Saleh, head of the White Helmets, working the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly but eager to return to the place where over 140 of his colleagues have perished saving what they estimate to be 60,000 of their neighbors. "At the end of the day, this is my country," he says.

> 'I think there's a lesson there. There's no reason to believe this will be as bad as things get.'
>
> **NOAH BONSEY,** Syria analyst at the International Crisis Group

The White Helmets work across the shattered interior of Syria, wherever Assad's aircraft roll out barrel bombs or Russian fighters direct their missiles. But more and more, that work is in Aleppo. The country's largest city, it is where the forces of Assad and his allies are ramping up for a possibly titanic assault. As many as 300,000 people are living under siege in the city's eastern section, which the rebels have held since the early days of the war, but are now cut off from the countryside beyond.

It has become the signature battleground of the conflict. In the days before a cease-fire negotiated by Russia and the U.S. went (briefly) into effect, its rebel-held neighborhoods endured shattering assaults as regime forces strove to make the most of a closing window for action. And when, after just a few days, the truce was blown to smithereens, the assault resumed, relentlessly: 1,700 airstrikes over the next eight days alone. On some days, they come every few minutes. And there is every reason to believe the attacks will grow. The one that finally shattered the cease-fire was an hours-long turkey shoot on a badly needed humanitarian-aid convoy organized by the U.N.

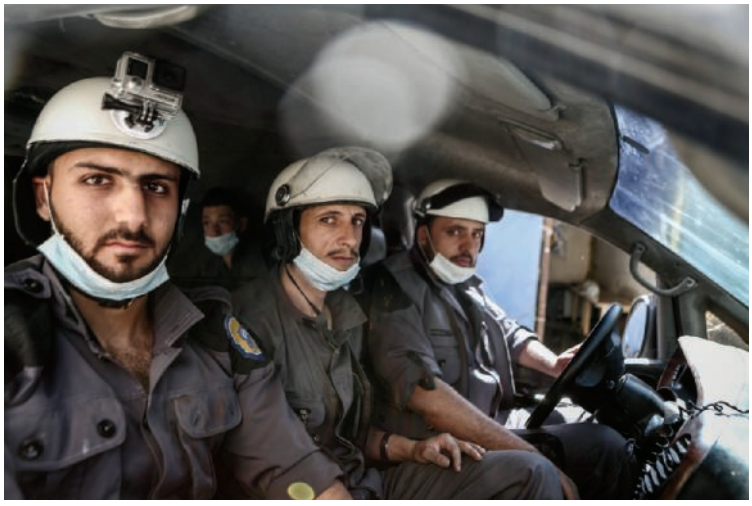
"Some of us looking at the conflict from the West have consistently underestimated the capacity for bloodshed in Syria to worsen," says Noah Bonsey, a senior Syria analyst at the International Crisis Group. "There's a temptation to think, Well, it can't get any worse. And yet repeatedly it has gotten worse. And I think there's a lesson there. There's no reason to believe this will be as bad as things get."

WHEN THE UPRISING BEGAN, Ammar Salmo was teaching English in the town of Safira, southeast of Aleppo. He joined the protests against the Assad regime in 2011, and after one demonstration, in June of that year, police arrested him at his home. He spent about a month in prison until his father paid a bribe equivalent to about $10,000 to free him. When the regime withdrew from the

town, he and other activists helped restore services in the area. Their work became another nucleus of civil defense.

They drew volunteers from a wide spectrum of Syrians: there were teachers and tailors, firefighters who defected from regime-controlled fire departments. (Saleh, the group's chief, was an electronics salesman.) Even militants who had fought in the armed rebellion set aside their weapons to join the White Helmets. From that disparate set of local groups grew a unified national organization that now claims more than 3,000 volunteers in rebel-held areas across the country. (Media associated with Assad or Russia have accused the White Helmets of links with militant groups, but the group's leaders say all their staff are civilians, and the White Helmets' code of conduct forbids taking up arms.) With initial funding from the U.S., the U.K. and Japan, a consulting firm called ARK began organizing training for the rescue teams in neighboring Turkey in March 2013.

The curriculum now covers the full range of hazards that the rescue teams encounter in Syria: how to search collapsed buildings, how to put out fires, how to handle unexploded bombs, what to do in a chemical attack. When the shells fall or an airstrike hits, they run in the direction of the destruction. The White Helmets' credo is a quotation from the Quran: "Whoever saves one life, saves all of humanity."



Three members of the White Helmets arrive at the site of an airstrike in Douma on Oct. 5

"What happened right now in Syria—it's madness," Salmo says during a meeting in late September in Turkey, where he has traveled after being trapped outside Aleppo, when proregime forces surrounded the rebel-held section of the city over the summer. "Because no one can believe what happens. Groups of aircraft shell and shell and shell without stopping. Even sometimes we ask if this fighter or pilot, doesn't this pilot want to drink a tea, to see his family? Why is he still in the sky?"

Salmo, 31, has a round face, a black beard and dark circles under his eyes. He heads the White Helmets' operations in Aleppo, though he is working now in the group's sparsely furnished coordination office in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, near the Syrian border. Salmo paces the floor, checking his phone relentlessly. A stream of messages flickers across the screen.

His colleagues in Aleppo are reeling from the latest spate of airstrikes. On Sept. 23, airstrikes by the regime or Russia—neither the opposition groups nor Islamic extremist groups like ISIS possesses air power—hit three of the White Helmets' four centers in Aleppo. His colleagues need to find new buildings. They need to replace cars and trucks destroyed in the airstrikes. In a city under siege, where basic materials are growing scarce, they need to somehow find fuel for their vehicles, so that they can race to the scene of the next bombing, and the one after that.

Another text message arrives. A relative in Aleppo informs Salmo his uncle has been killed in the shelling. Salmo grimaces, explaining that he had stayed with his uncle the last night he spent in the city over the summer. A week later Salmo will return to Syria, and he is bracing for more death. In a nation of 22 million, more than 400,000 people have been killed so far.

The White Helmets have their roots in the 2011 popular uprising. When the protests began, the regime answered with force, torturing protesters and firing on demonstrations. It wasn't long before demonstrations turned to armed rebellion. Rebel groups wrested control of Syria's towns and cities from the government, and the regime responded by targeting the life-sustaining infrastructure in areas captured by the rebels. When the conflict was still mostly fought in slogans, a favorite of regime supporters was also a threat: "Assad, or we burn the country."

That choice has been made. "When you are walking in the streets, you feel like, O.K., there's no street, you cannot walk because the rubble, the garbage, the water, the electricity. They were doing it by intention—the regime did it by intention," says Gardenia, an activist from the southern Syrian city of Dara'a, where the first large protests broke out. Now with the White Helmets support staff in Istanbul, she asked TIME to be identified by a pseudonym for fear of reprisal.

Local civil-defense groups went to work filling the vacuum left by the regime: reconnecting electricity and water, assessing medical needs, disposing of the dead. It was a humanitarian experiment in revolutionary self-organization—the skeleton of an alternate government establishing itself across much of Syria as the war dragged on from months to years, a shared enterprise that convened disparate

PREVIOUS PAGES: EPA; THIS PAGE: MOHAMMED BADRA—EPA FOR TIME

opposition groups and demonstrated that, absent Assad, Syrians could govern themselves.

That structure was largely destroyed—along with many of the physical buildings in rebel-occupied territory—by aircraft serving an Assad regime that fought in the same way it had governed before the war: aiming to strike fear into the population. Before the war, the Assad regime's primary tool was the all-powerful secret police, whose every glance implied the possibility of interrogation and torture, a knowledge that had penetrated every Syrian and coerced obedience. Now the tools are barrel bombs, explosives rolled out of helicopters or warplanes. The targets, significantly, are seldom rebel military positions held by the fighters known as the Free Syrian Army, also referred to as the FSA, nor are they the forces of Islamist militant groups like ISIS. The targets are residential neighborhoods far from the front lines. The aim is to force the city's population to capitulate and undermine support for the rebels. It's kneel or be crushed.

"There are losses on the front lines at different points," says Zakariya Malahifji, a political officer for one of the largest groups affiliated with the FSA. "FSA members are being killed and injured. But the big losses are among civilians."

Hospitals are another favorite target. Four were hit in as many days starting Sept. 30, according to the humanitarian group Médecins Sans Frontières. On Oct. 1, seven consecutive airstrikes hit Aleppo's largest hospital, code-named M10, over the course of one morning, killing two patients and forcing its temporary closure. The next day the shuttered hospital was hit again while being repaired. U.N. humanitarian chief Stephen O'Brien said in testimony to the U.N. Security Council, even before the first of those bombs fell, that eastern Aleppo's health sector is "on the verge of total collapse."

The White Helmets have become prime targets themselves. In recent months, after regime or Russian aircraft strike an apartment block, they circle back to make a run at the first responders who have scrambled to aid survivors. Many of the 141 White Helmets who have been killed in Syria perished in these so-called two-tap strikes, which have forced rescuers to delay their arrival at bomb sites, and with it lengthens the time before the wounded can be carried to the hospital.

What comes next seems ominously clear. The prospects for a truce, never strong, faded further after U.S. warplanes on Sept. 17 killed 62 of Assad's troops—in what Washington said was a mistake—instead of the ISIS forces they were supposed to hit. The Syrian military announced the end of the cease-fire on Sept. 19, and that night it (or its Russian allies, or both) struck a warehouse in the Aleppo countryside operated by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. The assault destroyed a convoy of trucks that was loaded with food and health supplies for more than 78,000 civilians.

As the convoy's mission had been carefully coordinated, both with rebel groups and the Damascus government, the assault was no accident; it went on for more than two hours. Some 20 people were killed. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon used his farewell address to the General Assembly on Sept. 20 to denounce a "sickening, savage and apparently deliberate attack." Meanwhile, in the Security Council, where Russia has blocked international intervention in Syria since the first days of the war, U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power called out President Vladimir Putin's claim that he had sent forces into Syria to join the battle against ISIS. "What Russia is sponsoring and doing is not counterterrorism," she said. "It is barbarism."

WHEN THE CONVOY came under attack, Salmo had been drinking tea on the balcony at a civil-defense center less than a mile (1.6 km) away in the town of Orem al-Kubra, west of Aleppo. He and the other rescuers tried twice to reach the warehouse on foot but were forced to turn back because continued shelling made it too dangerous. When they made it to the site after midnight, a video camera recorded the scene. Salmo's eyes gleam from the light of the fires burning around him as he gestures with both arms at the charred piles of blankets and the smoldering building. "Pampers—aid from the U.N. to the Syrian Crescent in order to be distributed to the people," he says, waving a package of diapers.

The video was posted online by the White Helmets, whose public profile has risen markedly in recent months. The group has been mentioned as a possibility for the Nobel Peace Prize (announced Oct. 7). In September, a stirring documentary, *White Helmets,* was released on Netflix. At the same time, attention might be a double-edged sword. On Sept. 22 the group won the prestigious Right Livelihood Award, also known as the "alternative Nobel." And the next morning, airstrikes hit those three facilities in eastern Aleppo.

"If you saw the size of the crater, you'd be amazed," says Ismail Mohamed, 31, a civil-defense worker inside eastern Aleppo, by phone. He had just finished a shift and was at home when colleagues began radioing for help. "It looked like judgment day took place there," he says. "Thank God no one was killed."

The attacks have cut down the White Helmets' capacity for relief at a moment when demand for their services was higher than ever. Two civil centers—bases out of which the White Helmets operate—were taken offline entirely. The workshop where they maintain their ambulances was knocked out of service altogether. As a result,

ALEPPO'S DESCENT
The long-traumatized Syrian city has seen violence escalate over the past month

March 2011
The first antigovernment protests take place in Damascus, Dara'a and elsewhere

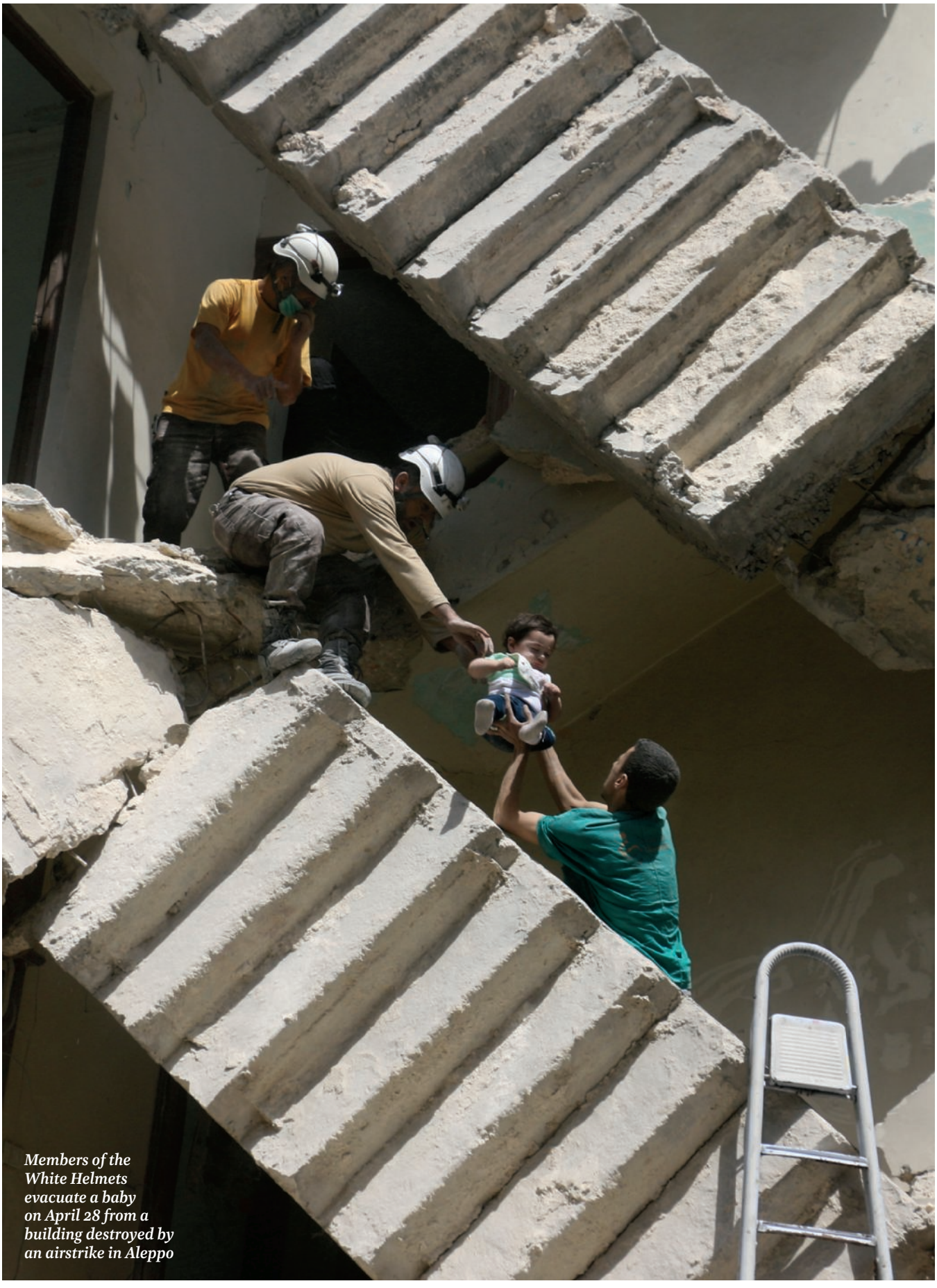
July 2012
The Free Syrian Army seizes Aleppo, beginning an ongoing battle for the city

Early 2013
The White Helmets are formed

September 2015
Russia launches airstrikes on the city in support of Assad

September 2016
The White Helmets' Aleppo bases become the target of heavy bombing attacks

AMEER ALHALBI—AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Members of the White Helmets evacuate a baby on April 28 from a building destroyed by an airstrike in Aleppo

White Helmet teams in Aleppo are now in a position where they respond only to strikes where there is evidence that living people are trapped under the rubble. Only if they have time, given their scant resources, do the White Helmets then go to retrieve the bodies of the dead. It's a painful choice—in Islamic tradition, burial should follow as soon as possible after death.

"The civil-defense members are exhausted," says Mohamed, the rescue worker in Aleppo. "Whenever they finish taking the rubble away from one place that witnessed shelling, they get called immediately to go to somewhere else."

With Aleppo now at center stage, at least the world's attention is being directed to the core of the conflict. For many people, especially those in the West, the Syrian civil war has become primarily about jihadism. ISIS is perceived as a clear and present threat to the U.S. and Europe, having transformed extremism into a movement and made terrorism a self-starting enterprise.

But within Syria itself, ISIS amounts to a kind of distraction—one that Assad both welcomes and has actually enabled, by freeing jihadists from his jails as the civil war began, to make good on his vocal warnings that any opposition to his regime would open the door to terrorists. For all Assad's talk about fighting terrorism, the two armies rarely fight each other, though they have done business; once ISIS gained control of oil fields, Assad's government became a paying customer.

In terms of killing within Syria, however, ISIS is no match for Assad's side, which is responsible for considerable casualties. In 2015, Syrian government forces and their allies killed eight times as many people in Syria as did ISIS. Observers say most of those victims were civilians, taken by the bombs that, regardless of whom they are targeting, are also dropped on the people rushing to rescue those very civilians, and on the undersupplied hospitals where they are taken for help.

These are war crimes, but no international tribunal has yet convened to address them. It was at U.N. headquarters that an al-Jazeera English reporter asked Syria's Ambassador Bashar Jaafari, "Ambassador, did you bomb the two hospitals in Aleppo?" Jaafari laughed and walked right past.

After refusing to intervene with troops and airstrikes against Assad when the conflict in Syria started, President Barack Obama now says he is "deeply haunted" by the events there. His critics on the left and right say his inaction left the field open for Russia's brutal alliance with Assad, and they call for U.S.-enforced no-fly zones and safe havens in the country—something the White Helmets have called for as well. But Obama continues to resist arguments—humanitarian, tactical or strategic—from senior Administration officials who want to add regime forces to the target list in Syria, where U.S. warplanes have rained bombs on ISIS for two years. On Oct. 3, Washington announced that it would suspend talks with Russia over Syria, another dead end for diplomatic hopes. Obama argues that steps short of a full-fledged invasion wouldn't stop the slaughter of civilians and would risk drawing the U.S. into a bloody quagmire. "You have to make judgments about what is best for the national-security interests of the United States," Obama told a CNN interviewer on Sept. 28, "even though what you see is heartbreaking."

50

Number of bombs and mortars landing each day on hard-hit neighborhoods in Syria

141

Number of White Helmets killed in action

2,900

Number of volunteers in the White Helmets, including bakers, tailors, pharmacists, carpenters and students

60,000

Number of people saved by the White Helmets

SOURCE: WHITEHELMETS.ORG

THAT MEANS THAT FOR NOW, the people of Aleppo's besieged east side are alone in their crisis, alone in their suffering—and they know it. According to the World Health Organization, in the week ending on Sept. 30, at least 338 Aleppo residents were killed, a total that includes at least 106 children, one or two of whose bodies surely unsettled a few thousand viewers on YouTube. Airstrikes also hit a key water-pumping station, a bakery where dozens of people were queuing to buy bread as well as those four hospitals—the ones to which bloodied civilians had been rushed.

Today, there is no electricity in much of the rebel sector, and at night terrified families huddle together in the dark as the shelling lights up the sky. "I believe the international community let us down and did nothing to stop Russia and Assad's massacres," says Najmaldin Khaled, 30, a teacher living in the area under siege. "We are dying every minute, every hour."

And every minute, every hour, those who do not die, but are hurt and hidden and incapacitated by rubble, will be reached by their neighbors, men clad in the jumpsuit of the first responder and protected by headgear that has already grown iconic: the White Helmets. Most important of all, they are Syrians, and in the most elemental way they are retaking ownership of a conflict that has cast them as victims, hapless pawns of jihadist ideologues or something else other than people who organize, care for and govern themselves.

Every time the White Helmets scramble toward the sound of bombs, those heroes of Aleppo reassert the quality that will finally end the war—a unifying national identity that has seemed lost to the sectarian bigots or regional rivals that are pulling their country apart.

The White Helmets go out, of course, for one another, but because they so badly want the world to see what they see, they also post images and video of it online, via Twitter and Instagram and other social media. As one hashtag reads, #ThisIsWhyWeRevolted. —*With reporting by* KARL VICK/NEW YORK *and* MASSIMO CALABRESI/WASHINGTON

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