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FEATURE / SYRIA'S CIVIL WAR

# Drawing hope in Syria

*A young graffiti artist in Aleppo aims to change thoughts of war and destruction with painted expressions of love.*



by **Basma Atassi**

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**Aleppo, Syria** - Nineteen-year-old Khalifa is on a mission: to camouflage signs of death and destruction in the war-torn Syrian city of Aleppo with expressions of hope.

The computer-programming student roams the battered streets in rebel-held areas with bottles of spray paint, looking for suitable canvasses for his art.

Colourful flowers on the remains of shelled houses and a happy Mickey Mouse on the wall of a bombarded military complex are some of his most recent works.

In Dahret Awwad district, he chooses a house struck by a missile to be his atelier. He waves his hand in dramatic gestures in front of the stone wall, creating an imaginary outline before he shakes the spray can and starts drawing.

Using blue and red paint, he creates a big, round smiley face and writes "I love you Syria" next to it.

Ten minutes later he takes a step back to give his artwork a final look before walking away as the cans in his bag make rhythmic clanking sounds.

"I will come back in a few hours," the young painter told Al Jazeera. "I usually visit my paintings every now and then to see the reaction of those who live around it. A child's smile upon seeing it makes my day. It means I have done my job."

### **An artist**

Khalifa always wanted to be an artist. When he graduated from high school last year, he enrolled in the fine arts school in Aleppo. But he could not afford the high cost of the equipment required for his education, so he transferred to computer programming.

He dropped out of university altogether two months ago after his face appeared on television while he was yelling in an anti-government protest.

"I was scared that if I went back to university, the security forces would arrest me in the classroom. They have done that with others. So I stopped showing up," he says.

"My graffiti may be successful in taking their attention away from their destroyed house for a minute. They may ask: 'what is this?' 'Who drew it?' 'What does it mean?'"

His venture into graffiti stemmed from a desire to do something for his city. He did not want to join the armed opposition after his two brothers were killed fighting against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces.

- Young painter Khalifa

"My mom can't handle more misery. I want to take good care of myself to make her happy," Khalifa says.

Some Aleppo neighbourhoods have become unrecognisable since fierce battles for control of the city began in July last year. What used to be the commercial capital of Syria has become the scene of house-to-house combat, where government forces' heavy weaponry have burned and flattened buildings to the ground.

The city's walls are scarred with bullets and rocket shrapnel. They are also full of signatures of opposition battalions operating in the city: "Liwaa al-Tawheed passed from here," "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra," "Salute to the heroes of Ahrar al-Sham", in addition to phrases like "The dog [President] Bashar al-Assad, "We will not bow but to Allah," and the trademark slogan of the Arab Spring, "The people want the fall of the regime".

### **Thoughts of destruction**

But Khalifa's graffiti stands out. It is colourful, creative and hopeful. He draws cartoon characters, flowers and rainbows and writes words like "hope", "love", and "freedom".

"Some people have to endure seeing their houses and memories destroyed in front of their eyes. It is shocking, and their minds cannot take it," Khalifa says.

"My graffiti may be successful in taking their attention away from their destroyed house for a minute. They may ask: 'what is this?' 'Who drew it?' 'What does it mean?'

"These thoughts replace the sad thoughts of destruction. This is my intention".

But Khalifa says not everyone appreciates his artwork on their walls.

"I once painted a teddy bear on a semi-destroyed house with a writing under it that said 'tomorrow is more beautiful'. I came back to it few days later to find that the owner of the house had covered it with white paint."

The owner of the house said he did not want the second half of his house to be shelled because of the drawing.

"But how can the fighter jet in the sky see the teddy bear on the wall?" Khalifa asks, before adding that he does not blame the man for being worried.

"While the regime has no presence on the ground here anymore, the fear it instilled in people for decades has not yet left.

"Even a drawing of a teddy bear can still scare people."

**SOURCE: AL JAZEERA**