There’s a short stretch of main road on the drive into rebel-held Aleppo, when you pass a prison that’s one of the last holdouts for the Syrian Army in this area, where the cars speed up. “This bit is dangerous. Sometimes the army shoots at us,” barks Abdul Kareem, before jolting the accelerator.

I haven’t seen Abdul Kareem for nearly a year. “I’m sorry for your loss,” is how I greet him. By this I mean his eldest son, Ayham, a 25-year-old battalion commander in the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Last July, on the day the rebels launched their assault on the city, Abdul Kareem brought both Ayham and his second-oldest son, Molham, from Zitan, the family’s village where they’d been fighting, for me to interview. Whereas Molham was a pensive, thoughtful type and couldn’t wait to return to his architecture studies at Aleppo University, Ayham was more like his father—driven and brusquely authoritative, impatient to get back to the fray. We kept in touch on Skype, and two weeks later he let me know he’d been stationed in Salaheddine, the first district of central Aleppo breached by the rebels and the site of some of the thickest fighting. A week later, the news came that he’d been killed by sniper fire.

“It’s OK,” replies Abdul Kareem, brushing off my outstretched hand with typical matter-of-factness. “Now I’m worried about the other one.”

The “other one” is the reason for our journey. On a whim earlier that morning, Abdul Kareem had offered to take me from the refugee camp in Turkey where he and the remainder of his family live to see Molham at
the front line. The last time I came here, the rebels had just taken Azaz, a historic and strategically important town with twin minarets just five kilometers from the border. As Abdul Kareem walks me around it, however, I see that their prize is now a ghost town. Most of the civilians have fled, and the best buildings have been destroyed, first by airstrikes from the forces of Bashar al-Assad's Baathist regime and then, a week before I arrive, by a ballistic missile. The hundreds of disparate battalions working under the loose umbrella of the FSA have made some progress here, but only inch by inch, and at incredible cost—and even then only with the help of Islamic fundamentalists like Jabhat al-Nusra, who recently pledged their fealty to Al Qaeda. At many of the checkpoints, rebels from the two different groups are indistinguishable. “Most of these lorries and pickup trucks are Free Army, you know,” says Abdul Kareem as we reach the edge of Aleppo City. “You can tell because they’re all broken down.” Shortly after that, a chunky four-by-four with tinted windows races past us, the black flag favored by Islamists hanging off its back.

In addition to Ayham, seven of Abdul Kareem’s extended family members have been killed. Six were fighting with the FSA; the other was Khalil, a 5-year-old from the family village of Zitan, who disappeared a few months ago. The boy had been missing for a week when they got word from a neighboring village that someone fitting his description had been found in the river. It is impossible to know exactly who killed him, but Abdul Kareem has no doubt it was the work of the shabiha, the paramilitary forces of the regime, whose ruthlessness has made them infamous among the rebels. “They had cut his throat,” says Abdul Kareem. “The doctor said he’d been dead for five days.”

In the constantly shifting landscape of Syria’s armed rebellion, it takes only a few dozen men to establish a katiba, or battalion. Molham’s consists of 100 fighters; together, they occupy five different positions on the front line and hole up in three or four makeshift barracks between shifts. The last time I met him and his older brother, their battalion went under the name of Omar al-Mukhtar, an Arab anti-colonial hero. Now they’re known as the Abu Ayuub al-Ansari, after a close companion of the Prophet Muhammad. The name change might be significant. At the dilapidated school just behind the front line where Abdul Kareem takes me to meet them, I see none of the three-starred paraphernalia of the FSA; instead, there are black posters inscribed with the words “There Is No God but God” and battered-looking posters of armed men in Islamist headgear. The only evidence of any politics is daubed in spray paint on the wall outside: “Russia Is the Enemy.” Only 200 meters from Syrian Army positions in al-Izza, it’s not entirely safe. Shortly after we arrive, I walk outside to use the loo and emerge to hear some commotion; a sniper, Abdul Kareem informs me, has just taken a chunk of concrete out of the front door.

Last summer, the rebels here were hopeful they could take Aleppo in a matter of months, but now they’re bogged down in a gruesome stalemate. I join some of them in the school office. While Younus, a 22-year-old cousin of Abdul Kareem’s and the joker of the unit, sits behind the headmaster’s desk pretending to be the governor of Aleppo, I tell Molham that he looks tired and older than I remember him. “I am fatigued, but not from sleep,” he says, “but from everything that has happened.” I ask if he’s become more religious in the last year. “When we are so close to death, we all become more religious,” Molham replies. He confesses that the rebels shouldn’t have launched their attack on Aleppo until they were sure they could take it, and his expression suddenly becomes gloomy. “The dream is over,” he says, and then promptly qualifies it: “Now, nobody cares about the future of Syria. All we want to do is finish this regime, no matter what the cost.” He asks me if I’ve heard about the death of his 5-year-old cousin Khalil. “It is things like this that make us hate, and the hatred in our hearts is growing,” Molham says. “I worry that one day it will be bigger than our dreams.” It’s only when he sits cross-legged at the front of the large schoolroom and delivers a speech full of earthy humor that I realize he’s taken Ayham’s place as battalion commander.

When Molham is finished, I ask about the rise of puritanical Sunni Islamists like Jabhat al-Nusra, who seem to want to turn Syria into a medieval caliphate. “I respect their beliefs. I don’t smoke when I’m around them, for example,” he tells me. Like all the rebels I spoke to, Molham insists that, regime claims to the contrary, the vast majority are Syrian, even if their leadership and expertise often come from Iraq and elsewhere. “Most of them are not radical and don’t agree with what their leaders say; they simply want to fight the regime. They don’t like the Alawites or the Shiites, but they don’t mind Christians. And because they’re not afraid of death, they are good fighters and very popular. We meet them and have talked about working together.” All the same, he worries about where this is headed. “When this is over, we will meet with them and discuss everything. If they take power, they will want to fight everyone. I hope we don’t have to fight them.”

Abdul Kareem changes into a long Arabic cloak and, with a Kalashnikov over his shoulder, disappears to tend to a friend who’s been injured. With nothing
else to do, I sit around on cushions and adjust to the ominous boredom of military life. Like Youness, just about everyone here is between the age of 20 and 24 and from Abdul Kareem’s extended family, the al-Akidi; it’s one of the largest clans in northern Syria. The rest are a motley bunch of trusted friends: one young man, his leg still in plaster, has come from the rebel stronghold of Baba Amr in Homs; another is a Palestinian with three years of medical training. One man, bedridden, turns over to take an injection in his rear end; four stand to pray in formation. The injured rebel from Homs stares intently at a bank of four CCTV cameras and talks into his walkie-talkie.

Every so often, rebels go around the room shaking everyone’s hand before returning to the front. When a bearded young man stands up to go, everyone breaks into a romantic ballad in which they affect to be saying goodbye for the last time. It’s not altogether light-hearted; the battalion is losing someone almost every week. Only a few days before I arrive, a 22-year-old former economics student at Aleppo University was ambushed and killed by regime forces in al-Izaa.

The last time I came here, much of the rebel fury was reserved for Alawite Muslims, the minority offshoot of Shiite Islam from which the Assad family and many of the regime’s senior functionaries and paramilitaries are drawn. This year, however, the Shiites themselves are the enemy. A television in the corner is blaring footage of the daily sectarian violence in neighboring Iraq, most of it directed against Shiites, and I ask Aleh, a wiry young man sitting beside me, whether he really wants Syria to end up like that. “I want it and I don’t want it. I don’t want it because it will kill very many. But the Shiites must understand that they don’t own Syria or Iraq. A very bad war is coming.” But surely, I say, he’s only talking about the irregular paramilitaries of the shabiba and not an entire religious group? “We don’t like all the Shiites, because all of them are killing us,” he insists. “They say bad things about our Prophet. When I kill a man in the Syrian Army, I am sad. But I enjoy killing Shiites or Alawites.”

Very little can prepare you for the epic scale of destruction in Salaheddine. In the worst-affected streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; a weightless, otherworldly quiet obscures the fact that streets, barely a house has been left untouched; 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streets narrow, drapes hang on the upper floors to block the view of snipers. It's only when we arrive that I realize they've taken me to where Ayham was killed last August. Molham, standing in the exact spot where it happened, points out the remains of a makeshift clinic where rebel-friendly doctors had been working when regime forces stormed the area. As we stand there, another group of rebels is preparing to go into battle: a white van packed with men wearing black Islamist bandannas fires itself up with cries of “Allahu Akbar!” before speeding off toward government lines.

After we return to the car, I follow up on something Abdul Kareem had mentioned earlier: that his battalion had arrested an alleged perpetrator of one of Aleppo's most appalling massacres and that the man had made a confession. Did they beat or torture him? I ask. “Just a little,” says Molham. The suspect had asked to see his children, and they were duly smuggled into rebel-held territory to meet him. “When they arrived, the man began to kiss their feet and cry,” Molham tells me. “They were telling him that they hated him for what he had done.” In the end, Molham and everyone else in the room was crying, too. Will he be killed? “Probably.”

Molham says that his unit handed the alleged killer over to a secret rebel court, where his testimony was being checked by human rights activists and lawyers. There is no way to verify this, and no prospect of an interview with the suspect. Torture and criminality are rife on all sides in Aleppo; confessions extracted under such conditions have doubtful value. What's clear, however, is that the disparate rebel factions are working hard to establish an alternative administrative and judicial system in the areas under their control. After we drop Molham off, Abdul Kareem takes me to the Al Shaar district to see it in action. In an open-plan office space above a factory humming with sewing machines, I find a long row of young men and women typing away at computers. Each table is responsible for its own municipal area: one for civilian defense, another for engineering projects, another for rebel-held hospitals and medical supplies. Everything is in embryo; the office has only been open a month, and the 25-year-old doctor who shows me around has only been working here for two days.

At a longer table in the middle, Abdul Kareem introduces me to a stout, balding man dressed in a suit. His name is Yasin Hilal, and he is an administrative official in rebel-held Aleppo as well as a leading figure in a rebel association of lawyers and judges, many of whom have defected from government areas. When I ask what kind of legal system the rebels are setting up, Hilal responds that its principles are those common to many Arab countries, combining elements of Islamic and civil law. It also comes with two kinds of courts: one to settle civil disputes, the other a network of secret military courts to try those accused of working for the regime. Though he doesn’t exactly say so, Hilal’s courts seem to have an uneasy working relationship with those of Jabhat al-Nusra, whose own heavily guarded Sharia court I’d passed on my way into the city. Would his government be more Islamic than Assad’s relatively secular Baathist state? Hilal seemed reluctant to comment but eventually said this: “The rules of justice are the same the world over. And there will be a charter to protect the rights of minorities.” I press him on how exactly his fledgling government would differ from the Baathist system. “It will be more Islamic, yes, but more modern.” Later, he shows me a montage of photos of rebel jurists who’d either been killed or are languishing in regime prisons.

The war in Aleppo is never far away. Mountains of rubble line some of the larger streets; an old man serves coffee beside the remains of a burned-out tank; a boy of about 12 limps across the street, an intravenous drip feed trailing behind him. Many of the cars are festooned with bullet holes; a pickup truck we pass is carrying coffins made of cheap wood. Rebel-controlled hospitals, petrol stations and bakeries have been flattened by airstrikes and mortar rounds; at one bombed-out bakery, in the district of Kadi Askar, activists claim that forty people were killed waiting in the queue outside. In Ard al-Hamra, where a flurry of ballistic missiles in February killed scores, I see an entire residential area reduced to bricks. Smoke is still rising from the district of Sheik Maksud, where Kurdish militias, upset at the bombing of their areas, have for weeks been drawn into their own battle with the regime. In two days, I see a half-dozen armed men who plainly aren’t Syrian: one tall, angular Afghan stands guard outside a building, another speeds along on a motorbike, while a few North Africans share a moped and a Kalashnikov. What ordinary Aleppoans make of this influx of freelance jihadis isn’t clear. When we approach areas thick with Jabhat al-Nusra, Abdul Kareem tells me to put away my camera.

Given the scale of the damage, it’s surprising how
Aleppo, like the rest of Syria, is being ripped apart by bombs, but more difficult to solve is the fact that its once enviable mosaic of ethnic and religious groups is being torn into its constituent parts. Two years ago, Syria’s political awakening was the great hope of the Middle East; now it looks more poison than cure. The conflict, with its cycle of attacks and revenge massacres, is systematically robbing the country of its future; even if the war ended tomorrow, Syria would still be suffering the effects of so many killed or wounded. But with Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon and Iraq queuing up to support their Syrian brethren, the fighting seems sure to spread. “The damage,” Molham told me, “is not going to become Syria’s alone. Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey—the whole region is going to go up in flames.”

Abdul Kareem had invited me to come and have dinner at his refugee camp, and the day after we get back I take him up on his offer. I arrive early and we spend the afternoon in his steel container, chatting, drinking strong Arabic coffee and, out of the corner of our eyes, watching a rebel-friendly news channel. The minaret from Aleppo’s most distinguished mosque, a thousand-year-old world heritage site revered by Christians and Muslims alike, has just been destroyed in heavy fighting. Another friend of Ayham, a young man called Serj, was killed the day before; Abdul Kareem shows me his picture on Facebook. “I knew him well,” he says. “We all did.” From the same Facebook account, he plays me a propaganda video from Molham’s unit. With Islamist battle music for its soundtrack, the video shows fighters clad in black balaclavas, cocking their rifles above a half-dozen burly, kneeling shabiha; they almost certainly executed the prisoners immediately after. A few weeks later, I would hear that Younness has been killed too, in the course of a raid on army positions at Al-Izaa. One of his fellow rebels would send me a picture of his bloodied body, wrapped in a white shroud, and then politely request a photo of Youness from when he was still alive.

Over a delicious dinner of roast chicken and aryan, the yogurt-based drink popular among Syrians, I ask Abdul Kareem how long this can go on. “One month if you give us weapons,” he says, in the familiar rebel refrain, “ten years if you don’t.” The Shiites, he adds, unprompted, “are the worst people in the world. They’re killing us, with knives.” His two younger sons have joined us to eat, and Saleh, his clued-up 13-year-old, uses his finger to mimic the act of slitting someone’s throat. It’s what they did to 5-year-old Khalil, he says.

The last time I came here, the rebel conversation was all about how the Syrian revolution was for everyone, how all of the country’s different denominations were playing their part, even if discreetly, to push it forward. Are there any Shiites at all in the FSA? I ask Abdul Kareem. “No.” Do they have a future in Syria? “Maybe not.” I wonder what he makes of Jabhat al-Nusra’s phenomenal rise as the rebellion grinds on. “Ninety-nine percent of them will lay down their guns forward. Are there any Shiites at all in the FSA? I ask Abdul Kareem. “No.” Do they have a future in Syria? “Maybe not.” I wonder what he makes of Jabhat al-Nusra’s phenomenal rise as the rebellion grinds on. “Ninety-nine percent of them will lay down their guns when the regime falls; they are good people and don’t like what their leaders are saying.” Like every other Syrian rebel I meet, however, Abdul Kareem knows they are the coming thing. “Say there are 5,000 Nusra here now,” he says, spitting out the words. “Next year, I promise you there will be 50,000.”
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