

# DAMASCUS TO DOHA

Artist and photographer **Jaber Al Azmeh** recalls life in an oppressive yet beloved Syria and how he is now distilling his memories on the desert fringes of Doha.

I chose to live on the outskirts of my city, avoiding noise and pollution. I built myself a house on a plot of land east of Damascus on the edge of the desert. In Doha, the city in which I've been living for the past five years, I often spend time in the desert as well... I'm not a city man.

I was never charmed by Damascus, but loved it still. I loved it not merely as a hometown (I was always sceptical about nationalism and other manifestations of the human tribal instinct), but because I appreciated its uncanny beauty tainted by a streak of modern ugliness; secret service agents colonising its streets, huge advertisements bearing witness to the corruption of government elites, and the stench of a debased system revealing itself around every corner. I tried ignoring the ugliness, but I failed. I felt provoked in my own city, haunted by an overwhelming feeling that it was under occupation.

In childhood, a farm belonging to my grandfather in the beautiful "Ghoutah" surrounding Damascus provided a haven for the family. We used to get together every Friday, and my sister, cousins and I would lose ourselves in the farm running from tree to tree picking plums, apricots and peaches, trying to avoid the grown-ups lest we get in trouble for being too unruly and free. I recall very distinctly the freshness and the clarity of the well's water, which we used to race as it ran through the irrigation channels. I remember the horror of a nettle's sting, and the smell of burning wood when the family gathered in the evening around a fire that we often built under the largest of the giant walnut trees.

By contrast, on weekdays we were forcibly transformed into "Baathist Vanguard"


at primary school, being groomed to be promoted within a few years to the "Ba'athist Youth". We learnt most of what was in our schoolbooks, but more important were those early skills of survival, creativity, sarcasm and friendship that prepared us for the kind of life that awaited. We used to excel at improvising ways for mocking what was meant to be our greatest fear; the "Leading Father", whom we had to salute every morning in our military uniform in the schoolyard and swear our loyalty to him forever.

When one of our classmates got into trouble, we would try to come up with (usually unsuccessful) ways of saving him from the violence of our military trainer or the school's principal. I remember how we used to tear out pages from our 'nationalism education' books, rolling and taping them into a ball to play a quick game of football during break. Ironically, this was a subject that we all used to pass, even though all its textbooks served no other use than making footballs. All we had to do was fill the exam papers with the lies and slogans that we had to chant in the schoolyard every morning!

I remember when, in tenth grade, a new principal arrived at our school. His vicious reputation had reached the school before him. He looked like someone from the intelligence service, coming into our classroom after we had frustrated our philosophy teacher. He walked in calmly, in what seemed like a mastered skill to maximise the students' terror. He asked every student to take a pen and a paper and go down to the schoolyard. Then he asked us to disperse around the yard, ensuring that every student sat at least two metres away from the next. He then ordered us to write in secrecy the names of the classmates who had caused the disruption in

class. It was the first time that we had faced this kind of interrogation. We didn't know how to escape it, nor did we want to write any names on these papers, but most were too scared not to... After a few long and heavy minutes, we handed in the papers. The results were amazing! Every student had written his own name on his piece of paper.

This is how my childhood was divided, between the joyful times on my grandfather's farm and learning how to survive with my friends in a dictatorship. As kids living under an oppressive regime, our self-awareness constituted a stark division, even a contradiction, between our public and private worlds. I guess this is also how our lives in Damascus were shaped as grown-ups; a similar duality existed between a personal life marked by beauty, domesticity and warm friendships on the one hand, and vigilance, even a calculated aggressiveness, on the city's streets on the other.

The obligatory departure from Damascus and the destruction of my country was very painful for me (like for any other Syrian). It led me into a journey of intensive thinking and provoked me to question the fundamental assumptions that we all inherit. Looking back at that journey, from the formative years in Damascus through the experience of displacement and the long hours of contemplation in the Doha desert, I can discern the clear influence of that journey on my work. This is especially reflected in my last body of work, *Border-Lines*, in which I'm trying to put forward a renewed narrative related to homeland, address assumptions that had previously been taken for granted, and explore questions related to our very existence. 



Jaber Al Azmeh (centre) with classmates during compulsory school summer service. Image courtesy the artist.