

# It's Happening Now...

Hasn't "never again" already been said?



Alessio Romenzi

In February 2012, Italian photographer Alessio Romenzi travelled to al-Qusair and Homs in Syria. A freelancer since 2005, Romenzi's work has appeared in *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and other internationally recognized newspapers. His previous efforts to document the revolutions in Egypt and Libya prompted a trip to Syria to continue covering the ongoing story.

*[Syria is] a very interesting and unfortunately sad story that I wanted to... tell. As a photographer, I like being in places to watch what is going on. [Syria] was quite different from Egypt and Libya. This time, I [felt a] responsibility to do something for the people. That's why I went to Syria. (\*)*

In Syria, Romenzi used his camera to expose the events there to a worldwide audience. While in Syria, he spent most of his time in al-Qusair, a city in the western part of the country which belongs to Homs Province. Romenzi's photographs of al-Qusair depict daily life as well as the effects of the ongoing fighting. His images capture the impact of the violence on individuals and families, whether fighters or civilians.

*It was quite safe the first [few] days... [as] there was no fighting. I just began taking pictures of daily life, which is a large portion of the body of my work there. [But] two days [later]...*

In the midst of the fighting, Romenzi had to learn about the techniques and weapons being used. He had to balance his desire to take interesting pictures with the need to stay safe, and his photographs offer proof of his success in that effort. For instance, his pictures of the fighting in al-Qusair demonstrate the utter brutality of the violence and capture the reactions of people in extreme situations. Romenzi believes that people reveal themselves completely under such conditions: devoid of masks or facades. His observations indeed correspond with his photography, both of which testify to the fact that there is nothing "clean" in war, no recognizable difference between good and bad, right or wrong.

*In that moment, when [people] shoot [or] run, when they [are] injured or dead, [they are the purest example of] a human being—beasts, that's what we are.*

Romenzi discovered that the Free Syrian Army has a complex relationship with photography.

*They never [took] us to [where] the FSA was fighting... they didn't want... me to go here [or] there. They [didn't] want to show [everything].*

Many in the FSA refused to reveal their faces for fear that they might be recognized and their families arrested—or worse. Others recognized that Romenzi played an important role in exposing the events in al-Qusair to the outside world but feared giving the impression that they were participating actively in the violence. Journalists were often admonished to portray the FSA and the Syrian people as victims.





In Syria, Romenzi saw more death than in Egypt and Libya. As his images indicate, shells fired from mortars and tanks do not discriminate between FSA soldiers and Syrian civilians; anyone could be injured or killed at any moment. The pictures he took during his two days in Homs not only reveal the extent of the violence, but also the paucity of resources and skilled individuals needed to cope with the violence.

*At least in Libya there were fighters against fighters. There are fighters [on both sides here, too], but most of the dead are civilians. I mean, people [were] killed [when] they [went] shopping to buy food for the family. [A] mortar fell in... the street... [and] that woman [never] reached the shop to buy bread. How [would] the family react when the news arrived that she had been killed without any reason? The only reason [was that she was] in the right place [at] the [wrong time].... Homs was different because it was not a real fight... it was just indiscriminate shelling.*

After two days of heavy bombardment, Romenzi—like his activist and FSA hosts—was barely able to leave the media center. He decided things had become too dangerous when he finished photographing the hospital and the refugees

*[The] most difficult moments for me [were] when I left. [It] doesn't make sense but somehow, I decided to leave them there. [They could have left], but they decided to stay and keep fighting. Even [though my] weapons [were just] little cameras or [notes on which to] write [down] facts, I felt guilty for [leaving].*

huddled in a basement for safety. With help, Romenzi managed to flee Homs and return to al-Qusair.

Romenzi's photographs explain that the photographer's experience in Syria was important on a personal as well as a professional level. The time he spent in al-Qusair and Homs filled him—for the first time—with a sense of duty to the people and to the place. He felt a need to do something. While his photographs are often urgent and focused on moments of pain and despair, they also note that despite the insanity of the violence, life somehow continues.

*I think it is extremely important to tell as much of the story as possible. [Without it], the world can [only] do [so] much, [so telling it is] really the only hope.... I really hope [the violence stops] as soon as possible because... [in] this revolution, most of the victims are civilians. [They are not at] fault [and they are guilty] of nothing. I don't know [about] military intervention, but this shame [must] stop.*

In his photographs, Alessio Romenzi demonstrates the emotional connection he has with the subjects in those pictures. More to the point, the emotions expressed in the body of Romenzi's work make it clear that this collection of images is far more than just another example of photojournalism.

(\*) Passages in italics are extracts from an interview of Alessio Romenzi by Monika Borgmann, June 2012.



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