

# Gunshots And Classical Notes In The Desert

In 2015, 25 Syrian soldiers are executed by the Islamic State in Palmyra. Barely a year later, the ruins are witness to a classical concert honoring those who fought to end the bloody war. *Russia Today's Paula Slier*, who was there, says Palmyra has found its soul again.

Suddenly, the camera pans the faces of the young men lined up on their knees inside the ancient amphitheatre. They stare straight ahead; fear and anguish in their eyes. Within minutes, these 25 Syrian soldiers will be dead – shot execution-style by children not older than 13 years, pistols in hand, standing behind them. A baying crowd of men and boys are watching, wearing military uniforms and headscarves. A giant Islamic State flag waves in the background.

“That’s my cousin Anas,” Talal Jba’i, a young Syrian man, whispers, pointing to the video of the execution on his laptop. Islamic State, as is their trademark, have posted the manslaughter online. The man he is pointing to is young with dark eyelashes and pale skin, his eyes nervously blinking as the camera follows his glance downwards... He knows what’s coming.

Anas Jba’i was sent to Palmyra (an ancient city in the Syrian desert) from Damascus to defend the city as part of Syrian President Bashar Assad’s army. He’d kept in touch with his family daily until suddenly the text messages stopped. No one knew what had happened until they saw the haunting footage. Talal wipes a tear from his face, “The video is so sad... You can see my cousin’s body trembling...”



(From far left) Russian soldiers in Syria; Slier reporting from the Palmyra ruins; an online image of the ISIS execution at the ruins

It’s difficult to watch the moments before a person is killed and Talal switches off his laptop – he has seen the video many, many times.

**Dateline:** Palmyra, July 4 2015

**Fast-forward:** May 2016

In the same amphitheatre where Anas and 200 others were executed, including civilians, now sit hundreds of Syrian and Russian soldiers, officials from the Red Crescent, religious leaders and dignitaries from across Syria. But this time, the killers on stage have been replaced by world-renowned musicians belonging to one of Russia’s top orchestras. The ricochet of bullets has been drowned out by the soothing melody of classical music. The Islamic State flag has long since gone. In its place stands a huge photograph of Khaled al-Assad, an 82-year-old renowned Palmyra antiquities scholar who was beheaded for refusing to reveal to the jihadists where valuable artefacts had been hidden. His mutilated body was hung on a column in the main square.

The hot sun beats down against the back of my neck and I slowly doze as the gentle music reverberates through the ruins. Surrounded by the Syrian desert, it seems surreal to be here – a place that saw so much violence is now again a place of beauty, peace and harmony.

I am in Palmyra with the Russian army to commemorate al-Assad and also the so-called “Russian Rambo”, a 25-year-old Russian special operations soldier, Alexander Prokhorenko, who was fighting inside Palmyra, and who called on Russia fighter jets to bomb his location after he realized he was surrounded by Islamic State fighters – he called for his suicide and died a hero. Aptly entitled ‘Pray for Palmyra, music revives the ancient ruins’, the concert is a tribute to them and all those who’ve fought to end the five-year bloody Syrian civil war.

Before reaching Palmyra, one drives along a long stretch of desert littered with burnt-out vehicles and fallen power lines

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hanging limply next to empty ammunition crates – remnants of the heavy battles that forced the jihadists from here. As you enter, row upon row of destroyed

and semi-destroyed apartment buildings line the unpaved streets – some are blown wide open allowing you to peer into one half of someone’s living room or bedroom. A metal sign with the word ‘hotel’ dangles from the top of one of the buildings and it’s easy to imagine backpackers in years gone past coming here to visit the ruins and relax in the city’s outdoor cafes. To the right of the clay houses where the city’s 35,000 residents once lived, are the infamous ruins that give Palmyra its nickname, ‘gem of the Syrian desert’.

Dating back to the early second millennium BC, Palmyra was one of the richest ancient civilization centers and its Greco-Roman ruins are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Now it’s Syrian soldiers who’ve taken up occupancy here. Together with the Russians, they’ve cleared the city’s historical centers of mines and are now busy demining some 560 hectares of residential neighborhoods.

As one Syrian journalist explains to me: “Before Islamic State left, they booby-trapped large parts of the city and most of the ancient ruins. They were hoping that if the Syrian army ever arrived here, they’d mistakenly trigger the traps and everything would implode.”

But thankfully that never materialized and Palmyra is in better condition than I’d expected. But still, some of the temples have been destroyed so badly that they cannot be restored. It’s a view echoed by the UNESCO delegation that’s visiting – represented by ambassadors from both South Africa and Zimbabwe. “Palmyra has found its soul again,” they tell me.

And that soul comes in the form of a classical concert briefly punctured by the far-off roar of gunfire – a reminder that the civil war that has engulfed this small country is far from over. Islamic State is just 15 kilometers from the city. **EW**

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