

This is one of many front-lines created in the six-and-a-half years of war that have devastated Syria.

I'm with Bassem, a former art teacher who swapped his paintbrush for a Kalashnikov. We're making our way over the rubble that was once the country's third-largest city. Snipers lurk about 20m away – a fact I'm desperately trying to ignore.

Among the smashed remains of a third-storey apartment I find a photo of a smiling family – a father, mother and three children. I pocket it, making a mental note to try to find them after the war. We're now in their living room and their clothes and furniture are strewn across the floor. The ceiling's covered with ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) graffiti and the remains of what appears to have been a mortar shell. We're climbing in and out of the building's walls, which have been blasted away either during fighting or deliberately by soldiers wanting to move through the city unseen by the snipers hiding on every rooftop. Now in the kitchen, I can hear an undamaged clock still ticking.

This isn't the safest place to be and my pulse is racing. I'm weighed down by a bulletproof vest, but we're moving quickly to avoid becoming targets. I recall a colleague telling me that it's not the bullet with your name on it that you should fear – it's the one addressed "to whom it may concern".

I've always accepted that there's a certain



amount of risk involved in covering war zones and I've found strength in the belief that when my time's up, it's up. But that doesn't mean I want to do anything stupid – and I'm questioning the wisdom of getting so close to those snipers.

"I was teaching when a mortar shell landed in the schoolyard," 29-year-old Bassem tells me. His long, black beard covers most of his face and he's wearing Syrian army fatigues. "There were many victims. I remember holding a little girl and feeling so sorry for her family. From that moment I knew I had to get involved."

Residents are starting to return to the city and clothes flap on washing-lines. The sound of a child's laughter punctuates the rumble of machine-gun fire and I'm amazed, yet again, at the resilience of human nature and the

ability to carry on, no matter how terrible the circumstances. In a side street, a soldier kicks a ball around with a six-year-old boy.

"I used to play football like him," another soldier says, "and now I have to carry a gun just so that he can do what other boys in the world take for granted."

There are only a handful of journalists in Syria at the moment – it's simply too dangerous to work here and most international networks prefer to avoid the risk. Not many airlines fly into the country either. My airline of choice is

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the Russian military and, thanks to them, I'm back several months later in the city of Latakia. The Russian airforce base, Khmeimim, is nearby. Since September 2015, its planes have taken off from here on missions to destroy ISIS positions. I watch the pilots kissing the nose of their plane for luck before every take-off.

Soon we find ourselves in the ancient city of Palmyra, whose Greco-Roman ruins are listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site. When the city was still controlled by ISIS, they destroyed some of the temples beyond repair. Since then, Palmyra's changed hands numerous times and while it's the last place in the world you'd expect to enjoy a classical music concert, that's exactly what I'm doing. One of Russia's top orchestras has flown in to perform and, for a brief time, the far-off roar of gunfire is drowned out by soothing music – a reminder that harmony, hope and beauty can prevail even in the most unlikely of places. 🌈

On the front line

War reveals unusual heroes. I'm reminded of this as I navigate my way through "sniper valley" in the Syrian city of Homs. By Paula Slier

