

## OPINION

# I Survived a Sarin Gas Attack

By Kasseem Eid

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On Aug. 21, 2013, I woke up in the dark around 4:45 a.m., struggling to breathe. My eyes were burning, my head was throbbing, and my throat was blocked. I was suffocating.

I tried to inhale but all I heard was a horrible rasping sound as my throat closed up. An unbearable pain drummed in my head. The world began to blur. I pounded my chest but couldn't breathe. My heart seemed about to explode.

Suddenly, my windpipe opened. A gust of air pierced my lungs. Needles seemed to stab my eyes. A searing pain clawed at my stomach. I doubled over and shouted to my roommates: "Wake up! It's a chemical attack!"

More than two years earlier, on March 18, 2011, my hometown, Moadhamiyeh, a Damascus suburb of about 80,000 people, had held its first demonstration against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Within hours, regime forces attacked, shooting and arresting protesters. I had recently returned home from college in the city of Homs, where I studied translation from Arabic into English.

About a year later, in June 2012, Mr. Assad's forces started a siege of Moadhamiyeh, hoping to starve out the rebelling residents; food and medical supplies were blocked. The bombing and shelling, which had been going on since the winter, was relentless. The town emptied. My childhood home, close to the front line, was bombed repeatedly. My mother and siblings fled. About 10,000 people remained trapped.

A council to manage the besieged town was formed. I worked as a translator, helping communicate with aid organizations and foreign governments. By the summer of 2013, I had seen children and infants starve to death. Several friends who tried to escape the town were captured, tortured and killed. We buried their mutilated bodies.

I moved into an abandoned apartment in the city center with three friends: Abu Abdo, my high school writing partner; Ahmad, a friend from middle school; and Alm Dar, a Free Syrian Army field commander. The siege had reduced us to eating weeds and leaves and to going through trash to survive.



Kassem Eid, outside the United Nations in New York in 2014. Mr. Eid, from Syria, was a victim of a government gas attack and has become an outspoken opponent of the Assad regime. Michael Appleton for The New York Times

On the night of Aug. 20, we spent about four hours looking for food. Even the trash offered nothing. Eventually we found some wild grass. We boiled it, drank it as soup and went to sleep. And the next morning we found ourselves battling a chemical gas attack.

Ahmad and Abdo scrambled out of bed, fighting for breath and coughing furiously. I splashed water on my face in an attempt to ease the burning. We staggered around the room, panting and retching. We heard urgent knocks on our door. “Help, please, they’re dying!” gasped our

neighbor Umm Khaled. She was carrying her children, 4 and 6, one under each arm. Both were unconscious. Their faces were blue and yellow and they were foaming at the mouth.

Alm Dar ran downstairs to get his old Range Rover. Ahmad and Abu Abdo followed, carrying the children. I raced through the building — past blasted-out windows, crumbling walls and piles of rubble — looking for the injured. When I reached the street I froze: Dozens of men, women and children writhed on the ground. Others screamed out for doctors, wailing, praying, pleading for their beloved fallen to breathe again.

I screamed too. And then I noticed a little boy lying in the dirt. What I saw eclipsed every horror I had seen so far: burned and rotten corpses after massacres, bodies of women and children shredded by shelling, shrieks of my friends wounded in combat.

The boy's face had turned grotesque shades of red, yellow and blue. His eyes were glassy. White froth oozed from his mouth. His throat grated as he struggled to breathe. I took off his shirt and tried to blow air into his mouth. I pressed against his chest and tried to pump the white poison from his lungs. Nothing helped.

After two or three minutes, Alm Dar pulled up in the Range Rover overflowing with injured women and children. He stared blankly at the boy, turned to his overflowing truck, turned back to me. I sat in the trunk with the boy. He was still struggling to breathe, that horrible grating sound still coming from his throat. We drove past more bodies and wailing survivors. I held him and cried.

When we pulled into the field hospital, a mile away, I lifted the boy out of the truck. He seemed heavier than before. I could barely keep my balance. I used all my strength to put him down. Then the world began to shimmer and turn gray, and the ground rose up to meet me.

I woke up to find a man holding me and yelling that I was alive. He had a long, wet black beard and reddened eyes. I knew him. Ahmad. My friend, my housemate, Ahmad. I was in a basement with small windows. People were crying and screaming, dousing victims with water, pumping their chests to revive them. The floor was wet and cold and covered with blood.

A doctor holding a syringe and two men carrying buckets of water approached me. They splashed water over my body. The doctor injected me with a clear liquid. I was in great pain, but as the liquid coursed through me I began to feel stronger.

I tried to push the men back when they bent down to pick me up. “Let’s go upstairs,” they told me. “The air is starting to get poisoned in here.” They helped me up a set of broken, rusty stairs into the open air.

The sun was rising. I shielded my eyes from a red ray of sunlight. All around, people cried as they lay on the ground or tried to revive their friends and relatives.

I took a few steps until I reached a burned-out bus parked in the middle of the street. The bus seemed familiar; I had a clear memory of seeing it on fire. I stopped and looked around. I knew this place. I was in the field hospital in Moadhamiyeh. Many people ran to me and hugged me. “Praise to God, you’re alive! Kassem, you’re alive!”

I began to recognize my longtime friends and neighbors. But I still couldn’t understand what had happened to me. Why did I feel so cold? I realized that I was wearing only my boxers. I wanted my clothes. “They’re covered in water and sarin,” my friend Abu Malek said. “Assad hit us with sarin gas.” He left to get me some clothes.

I remembered gasping for air, inhaling the most painful breath of my life. I recalled the bodies on the street, the glassy stare of the little boy. Abu Malek returned with my jacket and a blanket. “Now you should be — ” A loud blast cut him off midsentence. The explosion shook the ground. The regime forces began firing at us with tank shells, mortars and heavy artillery. A desperate effort to evacuate the hospital began.

A group of Free Syrian Army fighters sprinted past me. Abu Jamal, a young fighter I knew, urged the crowd to take cover, to fight. His face turned red as he yelled louder and louder. I kept staring at him, rooted to the ground.

The regime jets roared overhead. I craned my neck, searching for the planes, waiting for the sound of bombs. I surveyed the ruins of my neighborhood, hoping for something that might help me comprehend what was happening.

Alm Dar appeared and began shouting at me, trying to get me to move. I simply stood there in my boxers and stared at him. He slapped me. “Are they trying to invade?” I asked. “Yes!” he answered. “From where?” “Everywhere!”

I gathered myself and followed Alm Dar to the front line. A little later, I fired my first bullet in defense of my home against the people who had dropped poison on us.