



# Caught in the crossfire

Edouard Elias was covering the Syrian uprising and taken hostage for nearly a year. He talks about his experiences, war photography and why he is going back to work in conflict zones.

When Syrian refugees flooding into Turkey made headlines in 2012, Edouard Elias wanted to see the refugee camps for himself. He was studying photography in Paris at the time and used his summer holidays to travel to Turkey. Staying near the Syrian border, he got to know fixers and a group of American and French journalists, who asked the 21-year-old if he wanted to join them on a trip into Syria, starting his tumultuous career as a war photographer.

'I can't say that the only reason I went to Syria was to show the world what is happening there,' says Edouard. 'I think every journalist who says so is not being completely honest. There are a lot of reasons why journalists go into conflict zones and the only thing that matters is how they go about it and how they treat people while they are there. And that they come back.'

'I didn't plan to go into Syria, but I was

**LEFT:** A member of the Free Syrian Army, is exhausted after heavy battle for the control of the air base of Kweress near Aleppo, held by government forces. D4, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 320, 1/800 (q f/2.5

'I wanted to know what this war was like and see with my own eyes what was happening.'

curious and wanted to know what this war was like and see it with my own eyes, because in France the news is sometimes misleading. I also wanted the experience – the camera was a reason for me to be somewhere, where I would have had no place to be otherwise.'

By this time the conflict in Syria had descended into a bloody and brutal civil war. The uprising started in early 2011, when Syrians took to the streets to protest against their autocratic ruler Bashar Al-Assad. He responded with brute force to crush the dissent. A few months later the popular protests had turned into armed rebellion. The opposition splintered into an estimated 1000 armed rebel groups, commanding 100,000 fighters. Although there were many factors driving this war, the involvement of Lebanon's Shia Islamist Hezbollah as well as jihadists linked to Al Quaida turned this conflict increasingly sectarian, divided along Shia and Sunni Muslims lines. The

international community was (and still is) split with Russia and Iran propping up the Shia government, while Turkey, the US, other Western and some Arab states supporting the largely Sunni opposition.

So far this war has displaced nine million people – over a third of the total population. Six and a half million have left their homes to seek refuge in other parts of Syria and two and a half million have fled the country.

On this trip, Edouard shadowed rebels, fighting for the Free Syrian Army against government forces. He says, 'It was the first time I had witnessed a war and it was very difficult. Seeing wounded people die in field hospitals or the first time I had to cross a street watched by snipers. Often you can tell they're there because there are bodies on the road. Once you know that you have to cross, you are scared. You always count how many paces you will have to do. Then you know that you have to go in 10 minutes, then in five minutes and then you just have to cross, because you have to keep up with the guys you are with – you can put more people in danger if you stay. But I am not at all courageous, I was always scared.' ▶



**ABOVE:** The young rebel Edouard shadowed, during the attack of Kweress Airport about 30km from Aleppo after heavy bombing by Assad's Army. D4, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 250, 1/400 Q f/4.5

**RIGHT:** A group fighting for the Free Syrian Army, Edouard accompanied. D4, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 400, 1/60 Q f/2.8

**FAR RIGHT:** A member of the katiba or fighting unit Edouard shadowed. D4, AF-S NIKKOR 85mm f/1.4G, ISO 200, 1/200 Q f/2.5

'It's important to be accepted by the group – especially if you want to take photos from 50 cm away.'

As he was still a student, Edouard didn't have any media contacts, so on his return he visited the Visa Pour l'Image photojournalism festival in Perpignan, where he sold his images to UK's *Sunday Times*, Germany's *Spiegel* and France's *Paris Match* magazines.

In January 2013, Edouard wanted to return to the fighters he had worked with and continue the story. Although he went with the experienced war photographer Olivier Voisin, (who tragically died after being wounded by an explosion in February of that year) Edouard mainly worked on his own. He says, 'It's my way of taking photos. I have to connect with the people before I can photograph them and if you are with other Westerners you end up speaking French or English, which creates a divide between you and the people you are photographing – you are not fully present. If you are in a war zone you are always taking pictures of people, even while they are fighting, suffering and dying. The least I could do, was to give them respect. If there is no respect and no feeling, I can't take pictures.'

'It's important to be accepted by the group, too – especially if you want to take photos from 50cm away.'

'I was with a group of people, but I spent a lot of time with one young fighter – younger than me – whose parents had been killed in the conflict. He was in charge of where we were going and he told me when to run, when to stop or when to lie on the floor. This guy was very good and we got on well. I have tried to stay in touch with him, but it's difficult and a lot of the people I knew are dead now.'

On this trip, he took a series of portraits of fighters, who often look exhausted,



frightened and sad. He says, 'I think the empty look in their eyes says more than a photo of a guy fighting. You can see that they have lost everything.'

On his fourth trip to Syria on the 6 June 2013, working for the agency Haytahn pictures, he was travelling with the French journalist Didier François, when their car was stopped at a road block. 'They all have Kalashnikovs there, but because they were wearing skimasks, I knew something wasn't right straight away. They ordered us out

of the car and took my camera. Normally I would protest, but I just complied. They had ways to show us who's boss.'

It was only 20 days later, that they told him who they were. Later, two more French reporters, Nicolas Hénin and Pierre Torres, were captured and held with Edouard and Didier. The four journalists were mainly kept in cellars, which were very cold in winter and had no natural light. The conditions were rough, sometimes violent and the hostages spent some time chained together,

but the sensitive nature of this story as well as the fact that there are still journalists held hostage in Syria prevents Edouard from disclosing too much detail. Syria is currently one of the most dangerous places for journalists. Reporters Without Borders estimate that more than 150 national and international news providers have been killed since the beginning of the unrest, twenty nine are still missing or held hostage, while around 40 Syrian journalists and citizen-journalists are imprisoned by the government.



'In Syria you have the fighters and the victims', says Edouard. 'and you have journalists. Being kidnapped changes this dynamic, because now you are the victim. And you know that these guys want to kill you. For them you are a Westerner, who is responsible for Guantanamo Bay, the killings in Afghanistan and Iraq – all the mess in the world is because of you.'

'The only reason why they didn't kill us is because they had orders to keep us alive. But they tried to mess with us by not giving



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** A rebel during the battle for Kweress airport. D4, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 400, 1/60 Q f/2.8

**LEFT:** One of the rebels tries to reach safety as snipers are ubiquitous in the conflict areas. D4, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, ISO 400, 1/60 Q f/2.8

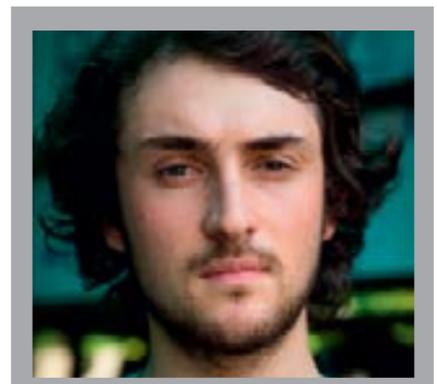
us food and drink or not letting us go to the toilet. We had very little food, which was hard' In total they spent 10 and a half months in captivity. 'There was nothing to do.' Says Edouard. 'You can either kill yourself or you just have to wait. So we tried to pass the time, but it was very difficult. We managed to make a chess set from cheese boxes, using nail clippers and a pen we found in the toilet. We also tried to pass time by talking, but when you spend 24 hours with the same people that can be difficult. Sometimes I didn't know what was tougher – to be a hostage or to be forced to spend time with people in the same situation. It was very difficult to manage, but we never lost hope. So how did he stay sane? 'Maybe I wasn't sane in the first place', says Edouard. 'What helped was knowing that I chose to go to a war zone. I always knew the risks. I knew that I could be wounded, killed and also be kidnapped, but decided to go anyway, so I

had no regrets. I think regrets can destroy you, but if you know why you are there it's ok. 'They beat us, but it was nothing compared to what the captured Syrian guys had to endure. It's difficult to get my head around the fact that it was only this little book, called a French passport that protected me. It wasn't because I was good or doing a job, it was because I am French, that I walked out of there, but the Syrian guys they captured are still there or dead. I find this very hard to think about. 'I thought we were being released every time they moved us – 12 to 15 times – which was often chaotic as we were in the middle of the fighting. In the end they just said, "Let's go to Turkey". They had been feeding us better for a few weeks, so I hoped that it was to make us look better for a handover and not for a video of them cutting our throats.' Finally on 19 April 2014, the four hostages were driven to the Turkish

border. Edouard says, 'By walking across the border our captivity came to an end after nearly 11 months. I had been thinking about this moment the whole time, but I only felt free when I could phone my family and tell my grandparents [who raised Edouard] that I was alive and ok.' The hostages were flown back to France, reunited with their overjoyed families and met by French President Hollande and the French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius and debriefed by France's intelligence service. 'It was of course great seeing my friends and family again, but coming back to France wasn't easy, because I was still full of adrenaline and surrounded by the press, and also having to deal with what happened. I think I only lost my status of hostage a week ago' [three months after being freed]. Edouard has done some work in France for the French nationals since his return, but is planning to travel to the Central African Republic, as an imbed with the French Foreign Legion, hoping that this will turn into his next long-term project. 'I knew before I went to Syria that it was possible to get caught, so nothing has changed,' he says. 'I think you have to dedicate your life to this kind of job.' ■

For more of Edouard's work visit [edouardelias.weebly.com](http://edouardelias.weebly.com)

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**CLIENTS:**  
National newspapers and magazines.

**WHY NIKON:**  
I chose Nikon, because it is more resilient. It's very durable and the autofocus is perfect. After I came back I saw that Nikon had brought out the Nikon Df and the D4s, which both look like great cameras. The AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G is my favourite lens – it is very sharp. I like working with it because I like the angle and you can get very close without the images distorting.

**IN THE BAG**  
D800, AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G, AF-S NIKKOR 85mm f/1.4G

**NEXT PIECE OF EQUIPMENT**  
The Nikon D4s

**KIT BAG**



Nikon D800



AF-S NIKKOR 35mm f/1.4G



AF-S NIKKOR 85mm f/1.4G