

Postcard from the Turkey-Syria Border by Andrew Li, M.D and Salma Shabaik, M.D.

Andrew Li, M.D., is currently a general surgery resident at Harbor UCLA Medical Center (expected date of graduation 2015). His wife, Salma Shabaik, M.D., is a family medicine attending who spent part of her training at the UCLA Center for East-West Medicine (Spring 2012). After hearing about the horrors of violence in Syria, the two decided to get involved in the struggle by volunteering their time and skills to those injured in the conflict. Andrew and Salma visited the Turkey-Syria border in late 2012 and treated war refugees seeking medical care. Here is their postcard from their four-day experience.

The Syrian revolution has created a network of grassroots activists from Syria, neighboring countries and the west, that is trying to alleviate the suffering created by the Assad regime. Our journey began on Nov. 8 in Antioch, Turkey with Dr. Ahmed, a 29 year-old Syrian veterinarian, whose last name is being withheld for his safety. He arranges medical care for those near the Turkey-Syria border and coordinates international physician volunteers.

We piled our supplies and ourselves into Dr. Ahmed's tiny Saipa, parked in front of our Turkish hotel. The 45 minute drive south towards the border was stark, flat and dusty. "Look there," Dr. Ahmed pointed at a small Turkish village tucked at the feet of the austere Nur Mountains. "Five people died there from Syrian shelling." The rest of the drive was silent.



Andrew examines a 19 year-old spinal cord injury patient complaining of nausea and abdominal distention.

Photo credit: Salma Shabaik

We arrived at a one-star hotel that had been converted to a post-surgical and urgent care unit. In order of decreasing frequency, we saw fractures, lower extremity amputations, wounds, spinal cord injuries, upper extremity amputations, and enucleations caused by bullets, mortars and missiles.

We met healthcare professionals from different parts of the world and had to be creative in our communication. Fortunately, between the two of us, we are fluent in Arabic, Spanish, Mandarin, and English. One interesting situation occurred when Andrew (a Chinese American) conversed in Spanish with a Spanish-trained Syrian orthopedic surgeon regarding a Turkish patient who only spoke French and Turkish. In the end we relied on the patient's friend who knew both Arabic and Turkish to let the patient know that his bullet wound was healing just fine.

We not only treated these brave men and women, we lived with them, ate with them, and shared stories over hot tea. They spoke of pain, separation and sadness, but also revealed to us a great resilience and optimism. One of the most unforgettable moments was witnessing a British physical therapist and 5 other Syrian amputees cheer on seven-year-old Malek, with an above the knee amputation, as he walked up the stairs with a pair of crutches. Malek was caught in the explosion from a missile launched by a fighter plane. He received the amputation in a Syrian field hospital and from there was transferred to various rehabilitation centers, displacing him from his family. During our visit, his parents and older brother were still in Aleppo, Syria. With the continued conflict and chaos, it is uncertain if Malek will see his family again. Current UN estimates as of January 2013 place the death toll at 60,000 and counting. Despite this, the courage and resolution of the Syrian people should give us hope that peace and freedom will come, though at what cost in human life, no one knows.



Andrew sharing tea with an amputee and paraplegic.
Photo credit: Salma Shabaik