

# For Syria's displaced dental care comes on wheels

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There's not much room to manoeuvre in Muhannad Qabtur's dental clinic at a camp for displaced Syrians near the Turkish border, because his spotless facility is run from a camper van.

The 36-year-old Syrian works tirelessly in the converted vehicle, offering dental care to some of the hundreds of thousands of [people](#) living in the Azaz region, a rebel bastion in war-torn northern Aleppo province.

It is a world away from the clinic he managed before the war broke out in March 2011, where patients arrived for scheduled 45-minute appointments, and where Qabtur could take a break now and again.

"Now, everyone puts their name down when they arrive and as soon as I finish with one patient the next comes," said Qabtur.

"There's chaos, no organisation... There's no rest from the beginning of the day until the end of it."

But despite the pressure, Qabtur is happy to help, and sees his work as a way to give back to his country and people during a conflict that has killed over 300,000 people since it erupted.

"I didn't go abroad so I could help people, offer help to my people and my country, which need me," he said.

Before the clinic opened in October, with help from the Independent Doctors Association and Barada NGOs, Qabtur offered his services from little more than a mobile dentist's chair.

The camper van he now uses is certainly cramped but it has modern equipment like any ordinary [dental clinic](#).

Each day Qabtur sees up to a dozen patients in the Al-Rayan camp, performing routine treatments and minor surgeries like extractions for some of the 350,000 people living in the region.

Patients settle back into a light green chair as the dentist and his female assistant, in crisp white jackets, adjust the overhead light and get to work.

He also travels to other camps in the area, but does not charge his patients, receiving instead a monthly fee from the Independent Doctors Association.

## **Helping people in need**

On a recent day, some 20 patients, mainly women and children, lined up outside the mobile clinic and waited to register with Qabtur's assistant.

Inside, Qabtur greets them with a smile and some jokes to put the nervous younger children at ease before pulling a medical mask over his mouth, covering his light grey stubble.

One of his first patients is a young girl wearing a headscarf dotted with purple flowers.

From a distance, the vehicle looks like an ordinary camper van, but up close its purpose becomes clear, thanks to a giant logo plastered on its

side, featuring a sparkling white tooth in a green circle.

"The importance of my work is in helping people in terrible conditions," Qabtur said, adding that his patients are "like family".

Syria's conflict has displaced over half the population, with millions fleeing abroad, but many more forced to find shelter inside the country despite the ongoing violence.

Aleppo province has seen some of the country's worst violence, and thousands of people have taken refuge in camps like Al-Rayan.

Unlike many of his countrymen who have fled Syria's harrowing war, Qabtur, a father to two girls, chose to stay put.

"I could have emigrated and lived peacefully like other doctors, but I chose to stay, to live and to die by the side of my people, to live and die in my country."

With the war approaching its sixth year, there is little sign of a political solution to end the conflict and Qabtur said he is not focused on the future for now.

"I don't think about what will happen after the war. I want this war to end, but for the moment, I want to treat people with what I have at my disposal," he said.

"I have no other ambitions than that."

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