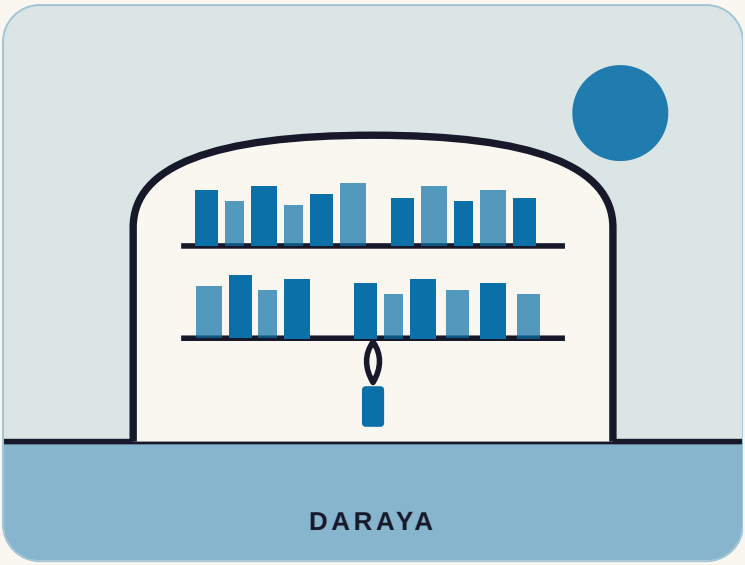

SYRIA

The secret library under the bombs

In a besieged Syrian town, young friends saved books from ruins and hid a library in a basement.

WHERE	Daraya
WHO	A group of young friends in Daraya, Syria, and the volunteers who joined them
WHEN	2012 to 2016

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Daraya is a town next to Damascus, the capital of Syria. In 2012, during the Syrian war, government forces surrounded it. This is called a siege. The town was cut off for four years. Bombs fell often.

A group of young people had an idea. They would search ruined and empty buildings for books. They saved thousands.

A library in a basement

They turned a basement into a library. It stood on a side street, under a building with its upper floors destroyed. There was no sign. People found it by word of mouth.

One account says it held some 15,000 books. The library had rules, printed on a sheet of paper and glued to a pole by the door. No borrowing without a librarian's permission. No late returns. Keep quiet while others read.

Before the war, many of these friends hated reading. To them, books meant censorship. Now books were a window to the outside world.

> **Books are our way to make up for lost time, to wipe out ignorance.**
>
> ABU EL-EZZ, CO-FOUNDER, QUOTED BY ABC NEWS, 2021

4	14	15,000
years under siege	age of the self-named chief librarian	books saved, in one account

Life under the bombs

The chief librarian was a boy named Amjad. He was 14. Other helpers were students of engineering and chemistry. The library found textbooks, so students could keep studying.

The shelves held politics, philosophy and stories from other countries. The most borrowed book was an Arabic translation of The Alchemist.

People held talks there. One friend got engaged there. Others mourned a friend lost in the war.

Once, explosives wrecked the entrance and buried it in debris. No one was hurt. The young men cleaned up the broken glass and plaster. They reopened within days.

The end

At the end of 2016, the siege ended. The people of Daraya had to leave. They could take only a bag or two.

A journalist who followed the story says soldiers later found the library and took its books to Damascus. They were sold at flea markets. Friends of the library bought some back.

Today, people from the library live in northern Syria, in Turkey and in France. They dream of going home.

How it unfolded

- **2012** Government forces surround Daraya.
- **2015** A journalist hears of the library online.
- **2016** The siege ends and the people must leave.
- **2019** A film and a book tell the story.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Most war stories are about fighting. This one is about reading.

In a town cut off from the world, books were a way out, and a way to stay human.

OUR TAKE

When almost everything was taken away, a quiet routine of reading helped them stay themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Keep a routine when life falls apart

The library had opening hours and rules, even under bombs.

Try this: Pick one small daily habit and keep it this week, even on a bad day.

2 Rescue what others leave behind

The friends saved books from ruined buildings.

Try this: Find one thing others are throwing away, and give it a second life.

3 Let reading change your mind

Many of them hated reading before the war. Then books became a window.

Try this: Read ten pages of a book you would not usually pick.

4 Make a place where people can gather

People held talks, planned a newspaper and celebrated an engagement there.

Try this: Invite two people to share a book or an idea this week.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Where much was lost, a shelf of books still held people together.

Sources

ABC News (Australia)
Above them, war ravaged their city. But below ground, a group of unlikely librarians found hope (2021)

Al Jazeera
Daraya: A Library Under Bombs in Syria (Witness, 2019)

Kirkus Reviews
Syria's Secret Library, by Mike Thomson (2019)

Publishers Weekly
Syria's Secret Library, review (2019)

Fact-check note: Two reporters tell this story independently. Delphine Minoui (ABC News interview; Al Jazeera film page) interviewed the men online and never visited Daraya. Mike Thomson of the BBC wrote a separate book, known here through the Kirkus and Publishers Weekly reviews; I did not read the book. Details differ. ABC dates the library to 2012 and Kirkus to 2013, so the story gives no start year. ABC and Al Jazeera say "thousands" and "some 15,000" books; the story gives 15,000 as one account. Minoui says some men put a book in their one bag when they left; Kirkus says no books were allowed, so the story leaves out the bag detail. The soldiers looting the library and the books sold in Damascus are Minoui's account only. The 48-hour deadline to leave is in Al Jazeera's film description and is not used. Amjad's age (14) and title are from Kirkus; Publishers Weekly also names him. The sources use different words for the two sides of the war, so the story says only "government forces" and does not label the young men. Several sources describe the library as secret and hidden; I could not check this independently. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.