

The Cat Man of Aleppo

In times of war, most people look after their families before anything else. This means that very few animals have anyone to feed them or a comfortable place to sleep. They are often afraid when they hear gunfire or jets flying above their heads. Moreover, they are often in real danger when people start to shoot with their guns. This is what happened in many towns and cities in Syria, a country where there was a lot of killing and many homes were destroyed. However, some animals that were living in Aleppo, a city in the north of Syria, were lucky. A kind, young man who everyone calls Alaa decided to protect them.

When the war in Syria began in 2011, Alaa was already looking after some cats in his home. When he became aware of the danger for the other animals in his community, he decided to save as many animals as he could. In the beginning, he gave a home to cats that had nowhere to go and finally, he had 180 of them. Sadly, during the war, Alaa had to escape across the border to Turkey in order to be safe. While he was living there, his main concern was for his animals in Syria. He was able to use his connections with many international institutions that help animals. He asked them for aid and as a result, some of the animals were even sent to zoos abroad.

Although it was dangerous for him, he went back to Aleppo and started to look after the animals once again. Some school children offered to help him provide the animals with meals and give them comfort in those difficult times. Some news channels covered his story and concerned people from other countries began to send him money to buy food for the animals. Even the government* heard about him and asked him to take care of the animals at the zoo. No one was looking after them and they were living in terrible conditions. He was able to use his connections with international organizations to send some of the animals to zoos abroad – to Belgium, the Netherlands and Jordan. In the end, apart from 60 cats, Alaa had four monkeys and some rabbits and dogs.

In Syrian society, most people don't keep pets. However, Alaa is different. He began to take care of cats early in his childhood. He has a very special philosophy of life. From his point of view, he feels it is his responsibility to help people and animals when they need it. This also gives him much joy. "I believe that whoever does this will be the happiest person in the world, besides being lucky in his life," he says. Alaa treats the cats as if they are his children and although there is danger all around him, the cats make him feel brave enough to stay. He adds that if he has to leave again one day, he will not leave one cat behind. The cats of Aleppo were lucky that they had someone like Alaa when they needed him most.



► B

Answer the questions.

- 1 What problems do animals have during a war? Write TWO things.
- 2 Decide if the sentences below are true or false. Which sentences in the text helped you answer?
 1. Alaa started looking after cats after the war began.
 2. Alaa only looked after cats.
 3. Turkey wasn't as dangerous as Syria for Alaa.
- 3 Alaa went back to Syria because ...
 - a. the situation became dangerous in Turkey
 - b. the animals needed his help
 - c. the war had stopped
 - d. the government told him to return
- 4 What did Alaa do that made him unusual in Syria? Which **new word/s** helped you answer?
- 5 Which paragraph tells us the following?
 - a. Looking after animals made Alaa happy.
 - b. Alaa had to leave Syria.
 - c. Alaa's story became famous.
 - d. Many people died in Syria.
- 6 Do you think it is right to risk your life to save an animal's life? Say why / why not.