

# Breaking Aleppo



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Atlantic Council  
1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor  
Washington, DC 20005

ISBN: 978-1-61977-449-0

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February 2017

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## FOREWORD

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After nearly five years of bitter fighting, bombardment, and siege, the Bashar al-Assad regime, Iran, and Russia finally broke Aleppo on December 22, 2016, defeating the opposition and displacing much of the local population. This represented a critical turning point in the Syrian civil war and shifted the balance of power between the United States, its local allies, and its adversaries in Syria.

The siege of Aleppo brought the horrors of the twentieth century's wars to the twenty-first century. Hospitals were bombed, not once or twice, but repeatedly; cluster bombs and incendiaries fell on residential areas; chemical weapons were used. Siege, hunger, and indiscriminate strikes brought suffering to women, children, the disabled, and the very old. This report details the tactics and strategy that the regime coalition used to break Aleppo.

Beyond Aleppo's implications for Syria, it bears highlighting what it means for the United States.

First, despite being party to the ceasefires negotiated by the United States and Russia, the Syrian regime used them to prepare offensives or freeze some frontlines in order to concentrate on others. Instead of being punished for this, the regime was actually rewarded with more ceasefires, which it then exploited in the same fashion. These breaches weakened the United States' moderate opposition partners and undermined the confidence of US allies in the region.

Breaking Aleppo also involved a pernicious misinformation campaign—nothing less than a war on objective facts by the regime, Russian officials, and media. This was aimed less at convincing than at confusing and disorienting rivals, sapping confidence, sowing disunity, and making truth entirely subjective, such that one party's lie became just as good as another's fact. This obfuscation, even in the face of clear evidence of regime or Russian wrongdoing, exposed the

“post-truth” era of international relations. In this world, the United States and its allies proved ill-equipped to vocally, visibly, and consistently drive the counter narrative despite frequent, severe, and well-documented atrocities by the regime side.

Finally, the regime's war in Aleppo showed that Assad was ineffective against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and other extremists—suggesting that the Syrian regime would be a poor if not harmful partner for the United States. He was unable to rein in sectarian Shia militia even after Aleppo fell, and his regime more closely resembles an unwieldy coalition of sectarian and organized criminal elements. He and his allies deliberately conflated extremist groups with Syrians holding even legitimate grievances against the government, and rather than use ceasefires to deploy forces against extremists, the regime coalition chose to attack mainstream rebels, in some cases actually losing territory to ISIS as a result.

Aleppo's fall was catastrophic for Syrians of course, but it was not only a humanitarian tragedy. The events surrounding Aleppo seriously damaged the interests of the United States and its allies. The events in Aleppo documented by this report are a reminder that diplomacy without leverage is dangerous, that the new information wars waged by US adversaries demand a new counter-strategy, and that the victors in Aleppo are not our allies against terrorism. The Assad regime is incompetent, unreliable, and shares none of the United States' core interests in Syria; it is also deeply implicated in well-documented atrocities. This report tells the story of breaking Aleppo in detail, so that the world will know these facts, and the United States and its regional partners will be able to adjust policy accordingly—securing their interests, defending their values, defeating terrorist groups, and protecting vulnerable populations.

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## BACKGROUND

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Aleppo has been described as the Srebrenica, and the Rwanda, of our time.<sup>1</sup> After more than four years of stalemate and months of siege and battle, December 2016 saw the last of the population from the besieged eastern half of the city evacuated on the now-infamous green buses.

The evacuation was the result of a crescendo of brutality. Years of indiscriminate bombings killed thousands and destroyed much of the east of the city.<sup>2</sup> This gave way to months of brutal siege,<sup>3</sup> and finally, to weeks of bombardment and fighting. The final assault resembled the razing of a city and its last inhabitants. Almost 3,500 civilians were reportedly killed by military action between June and December;<sup>4</sup> those who survived made desperate pleas for their lives on social media.<sup>5</sup> As a last-minute deal was reached to evacuate fighters and civilians, Syrians and westerners alike were left relieved that thousands of people were bused out of the city alive, but permanently displaced, as a preferable option to mass murder.

Aleppo is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. Before the war, the Old City was a UNESCO heritage site,<sup>6</sup> boasting architecture from 4000 BC. Its colorful, lively souks attracted shoppers, gourmands, historians, and tourists who enjoyed locally produced pistachios, baklava, olive oil, and the famous Aleppo soap. Aleppo stole the hearts of generations of western backpackers and Damascene tourists alike.

The local university taught engineering and physics, among other subjects, to a vibrant blend of students from the city, the countryside, and beyond. Aleppo's factories, an industrial force within Syria, produced pharmaceuticals, textiles,<sup>7</sup> and other goods both to service the local market and to export. Local restaurants competed for customers from sunrise until late into the night. Even during the first years of conflict, the streets of Aleppo were a riot of life: colorful, redolent with scents, and vibrant with the sound of conversation and community.

Even when the Arab Spring turned to bloodshed in Syria, Aleppo city resisted the violence. While dissent spread across the country in February 2011, it was not until mid-2012 that Aleppo's protests turned to revolt and, later, to violence. The uprising and resulting conflict were broadly supported within the population of the poorer, more agrarian countryside, while the city's middle and upper classes were less keen on a fight. Many within the city's industrial sector saw their financial fortunes tied to the government of President Bashar al-Assad, despite its known brutality.

When wider<sup>8</sup> protests finally came to Aleppo University in May 2012, they were violently repressed by the security services. Armed conflict soon followed. The "day of bloody bread" defined the early period of the war in Aleppo.<sup>9</sup> The Syrian air force repeatedly struck civilians standing in increasingly long lines for bread, raising accusations that the strikes were a form of collective punishment for those living in areas harboring the uprising. The images showed the savagery that would continue to be meted out to the citizens of Aleppo, disproportionately impacting civilians.

In July 2012, the ground war reached the city, and there it stayed. Aleppo was divided down the middle. The front line, which cut through the Old City, remained almost static for four years.

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- 1 Chandrika Narayan, "Aleppo joins events that define modern evil, UN envoy says," CNN, December 15, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/15/world/samantha-power-aleppo-srebrenica/>
  - 2 Margaret Evans, Stephanie Jenzer and Richard Devery, "City under siege," CBC, December 7, 2016, <http://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/longform/city-under-siege-aleppo-syria-civil-war>
  - 3 Heat map of damage to Aleppo, UNOSAT, December 20, 2016 [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNOSAT\\_A3\\_Aleppo\\_DamagePercentage\\_20160918opt.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNOSAT_A3_Aleppo_DamagePercentage_20160918opt.pdf)
  - 4 "Special report on the evacuation of civilians from east Aleppo," Center for Documentation of Violations, January 6, 2017, <http://vdc-sy.net/Website/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Aleppo-report-En-.pdf>
  - 5 Eliza Mackintosh, "Syrians post 'goodbye' messages from Aleppo," CNN, December 13, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/13/middleeast/syria-aleppo-goodbye-messages/>
  - 6 "Ancient City of Aleppo," United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization (UNESCO), <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/21>.

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- 7 Alpha Syria, <http://www.alpha-syria.com/>.
  - 8 Hwaida Saad and Rick Gladstone, "Students Are Assailed at a Protest in Syria," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/18/world/middleeast/protesters-set-upon-at-aleppo-university-despite-monitors.html>.
  - 9 "Syria: Government Attacking Bread Lines," Human Rights Watch, August 30, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/30/syria-government-attacking-bread-lines>.



Smoke and flames rise after air strikes on rebel-controlled besieged area of Aleppo, as seen from a government-held side, in Syria December 11, 2016. Reuters/Omar Sanadiki.

Immobility did not equate to calm, and fighting raged over strategic sites such as the airport, the industrial area, and the central prison for years. Most importantly, battles were waged for the Castello Road, which led into the opposition-held east of the city.

A policy characterized as “kneel or starve,” named after graffiti scrawled by pro-Assad forces and seen as a way to break the will and resistance of opposition-held areas, had been implemented across Syria since 2012.<sup>10</sup> Up to forty localities had been besieged at any one time, most encircled by Assad’s forces and their allies, from the *shabiha* militias to Hezbollah forces, Iranian, Iraqi, and

Afghan<sup>11</sup> troops. At times, these sieges were loosely enforced, and local businessmen made a profit by paying off checkpoint guards to allow them to bring in goods, which they sold at high prices.<sup>12</sup> At others, they were all but impenetrable.

Russia, which had long supported Assad, joined the war effort in earnest in September 2015, signaling the beginning of the most brutal period of the now six-year conflict. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed to be “fighting ISIS,”<sup>13</sup> but his assertion was deceptive: few Russian bombs were aimed at the extremist group. The initial intervention was supposed to be temporary; Putin even claimed to be withdrawing troops in mid-March. Throughout

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10 Anne Barnard, “Stick Figures and Stunted Growth as Warring Syria Goes Hungry,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/world/middleeast/stick-figures-and-stunted-growth-as-warring-syria-goes-hungry.html>; The policy has also been called “starve or kneel”: “Assad’s ‘Starve or Kneel’ Policy,” Chatham House, May 27, 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/assads-starve-or-kneel-policy>.

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11 Fariba Sahraei, “Syria War: The Afghans Sent by Iran to Fight for Assad,” BBC News, April 15, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36035095>.

12 Will Todman, “Sieges in Syria: Profiteering from Misery,” Middle East Institute, June 14, 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/sieges-syria-profiteering-misery>.

13 Maks Czuperski et al., *Distract, Deceive, Destroy*, Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, April 4, 2016, <http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/distract-deceive-destroy/>.

2016, however, the Russian presence and the Russian airstrikes continued, bringing a new weight of firepower to bear on the opposition.<sup>14</sup>

A “kneel or starve” siege was never far away in Aleppo. The long battle for Castello Road saw predictions of a siege years before it occurred. Access to the opposition-held east of the city was maintained via the precarious northern approach road that snakes down between the central prison and the industrial city on the outskirts of town. For year, snipers lined the two military positions that bordered the road. Cars would drop over a dip at the top of the road, then drive at reckless speeds, hoping to avoid incoming fire or airstrikes.<sup>15</sup> The sides of the road were littered with the burnt-out carcasses of cars and supply trucks that had not made it. As long as goods and people could get in and out, the population within the city was maintained, but the supplies came at an increasing human cost.

To retake east Aleppo, the government first needed to break the resistance of the opposition, and the civilians among whom they lived. Beginning in December 2013, an intense “barrel-bombing” campaign appeared designed to do just that. The homemade bombs—explosives and shrapnel stuffed into metal barrels and dropped from aircraft—caused large-scale destruction and injury. They were not as deadly as other weapons, but they were destructive and injurious, wholly indiscriminate in targeting, and unpredictable in effect. The campaign continued through 2014, with tens of bombs dropped on the city every month. As a result, much of the population of east Aleppo fled.<sup>16</sup>

In early 2013, the United Nations (UN) reported just over 2.5 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance, living mostly in opposition-held neighborhoods in east Aleppo and into the south west of the city.<sup>17</sup> Each wave of bombing led to a dramatic flow of residents out of the city, toward the countryside, Turkey, or

west Aleppo. By the beginning of 2016, only an estimated 300,000 people remained in the whole of the eastern part of the city.<sup>18</sup>

In February 2016, a negotiated ceasefire, or “cessation of hostilities,” brought a let-up in the violence, but it steadily crumbled and by April, the bombing began again.<sup>19</sup> In June, the government’s north Aleppo offensive began, aiming to take back Castello Road and close the ring of besiegers. Within a month, the offensive had succeeded.<sup>20</sup>

To raise the siege, opposition forces launched an operation in August to take control of Ramousah Road in the southwest of the city. This, too, was successful, and allowed the opposition some precarious access, but the road came under heavy shelling, preventing UN and larger aid convoys from getting through.<sup>21</sup> Cutting the government’s access to Ramousah Road also practically besieged west Aleppo: this led to a spike in the prices of goods and adversely affected civilians living in the west of the city.<sup>22</sup> While the use of sieges against civilian areas in Syria has overwhelmingly been on the part of the Syrian government, it has been deployed by almost all parties at some point in the conflict.

When the residents of the opposition-held Damascus suburb of Darayya were evacuated after enduring four years of siege and a brutal military campaign that pushed them to accept the displacement of all residents—civilians and armed opposition fighters alike—in late August 2016, the government’s attention turned to Aleppo. There was a rapid military push to take back control of Ramousah Road from the opposition and by September 4, the final siege was in place.

Mid-September saw a short ceasefire, painfully negotiated by the United States and Russia,

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14 “Tens of Thousands Flee Aleppo Following Latest Wave of Airstrikes in Syria,” *Guardian*, October 20, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/20/russia-us-sign-memorandum-syria-bombings-airstrikes>.

15 Faith Karimi, “‘Death Road’ Stands in Way of Crucial Aid to Eastern Aleppo,” CNN, September 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/15/middleeast/syria-ceasefire-castello-road/>.

16 Ian Pannell, “Syria Conflict: Barrel-Bombed Aleppo ‘Living in Fear’,” BBC, April 28, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27180006>.

17 Joint Rapid Assessment of Northern Syria - Aleppo City Assessment -, Assessment Working Group for Northern Syria, March 28, 2013, <http://www.acu-sy.co/en/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Aleppo-Assessment-Report.pdf>.

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18 “UNICEF Flash Update Syria Crisis,” UNICEF, February 13, 2016, [https://www.unicef.org/appeals/files/UNICEF\\_Flash\\_Update\\_Syria\\_Crisis\\_13Feb2016.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/appeals/files/UNICEF_Flash_Update_Syria_Crisis_13Feb2016.pdf).

19 Michael D. Shear and Nick Cumming-Bruce, “Obama Calls on Putin to Help Reduce Violence in Syria After Peace Talks Stall,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/19/world/middleeast/syria-talks-stall-as-opposition-negotiators-withdraw.html>.

20 “Syrian Troops are Isolating Aleppo,” *Stratfor*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/image/syrian-troops-are-isolating-aleppo>.

21 Lisa Barrington and Suleiman al-Khalidi, “Jets Pound Rebels after They Break Aleppo Siege,” *Reuters*, August 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN1010M2>.

22 Aron Lund, “Who is Laying Siege to Whom in Aleppo?,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, August 8, 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64274>.



with terms that were listed down to the letter.<sup>23</sup> Humanitarian aid was to be brought in through Castello Road, an arrangement that angered those in the east of the city, who saw this as legitimization of the siege.<sup>24</sup> In the end, no aid moved into east Aleppo<sup>25</sup> during the ceasefire, which limped through a few tentative days of peace before being broken when Russian jets, allegedly, struck a Syrian Arab Red Crescent aid convoy in western Aleppo as it crossed the line toward an opposition-held area. Despite the fact that the convoy had obtained the correct permission from Damascus, eighteen trucks were destroyed and twenty aid workers killed.<sup>26</sup>

When the final siege began, east Aleppo was served by only ten hospitals and seventeen clinics, staffed by just over thirty doctors, according to internal UN planning documents. These medical facilities were repeatedly hit by airstrikes, forcing staff to close them down or shift their work onto lower floors and basements. In late September, locals reported that Russian forces had begun using “bunker-buster” bombs, capable of penetrating into the ground, though hard evidence of the munitions used in the attacks was scarce.

On September 22, Syrian, Russian, Hezbollah, and Iranian forces and militia began the offensive to take back control of Aleppo.<sup>27</sup> The targeting of hospitals, rescue workers, bakeries, schools, and humanitarian workers increased; so, too, did the incidence of chemical, incendiary, and cluster munitions being used against the city, as this report will detail. Frequently, the limited hospital facilities were overloaded, trauma patients littered the floors and hallways, and the few remaining doctors worked

around the clock with dwindling supplies.

In Darayya and al-Waer, suburbs of Damascus and Homs respectively, heavy attacks on humanitarian structures and civilians had preceded a truce deal and an evacuation—in the case of Darayya, the evacuation extended to all residents; in the case of al-Waer to a smaller number, including fighters, but the siege remains in place.<sup>28</sup> As the attacks on east Aleppo’s hospitals continued, the stage was set for Assad’s final assault.

In the last week of November, government ground forces pushed on the east Aleppo suburb of Hanano,<sup>29</sup> which had become the front line within the besieged area. Within days, pro-government forces had split the enclave in two.<sup>30</sup> Thousands fled, some through the fields toward the countryside or out through Hanano to a reception center in Jibreen, others to Sheikh Najar, a Kurdish-held part of the city. A deal was cut between the opposition and the Kurdish forces under which the opposition would withdraw, the civilians could stay, and the Kurds would take control, but the areas were quickly handed over to the government and its allies.<sup>31</sup> Reports of detentions and executions began but were difficult to substantiate in the rapidly changing environment.

On December 5, Russia and China vetoed a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution drafted by New Zealand, Spain, and Egypt that called for a ceasefire in Aleppo.<sup>32</sup> The offensive continued.

By December 13, just 5 percent of east Aleppo was still in opposition hands. Thousands of human beings had been packed into an ever-decreasing area. Those most concerned for their lives were not just opposition fighters, but activists, journalists, doctors, aid workers, rescue workers, those wanted for state military service, and families of those wanted by the government’s security apparatus:

23 “Syria Ceasefire Comes into Effect under US-Russia Deal,” Al Jazeera, September 12, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/syria-ceasefire-effect-russia-deal-160912125315496.html>.

24 Raf Sanchez, “UN Says Armed Syrian Groups Blocking Aleppo for ‘Political Gain’,” *Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/14/un-says-armed-syrian-groups-blocking-aid-to-aleppo-for-political>.

25 “Aid Stuck at Border as Syria Truce about to Expire,” Al Jazeera, September 19, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/aid-stuck-border-syria-truce-expire-160919093247050.html>.

26 Louisa Loveluck and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “‘Why Did They Wait To Kill Us?’: How the Attack on the Aid Convoy Near Aleppo Unfolded,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/09/24/why-did-they-wait-to-kill-us-how-the-attack-on-the-aid-convoy-in-aleppo-unfolded>.

27 Julian Borger and Kareem Shaheen, “Aleppo Enters Second Day of Bombing in New Syrian Army Offensive,” *Guardian*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/22/syria-army-new-aleppo-offensive-ceasefire>.

28 Lucy Westcott, “Activists Report Napalm Attack on Last Remaining Hospital in Daraya, Syria,” *Newsweek*, August 19, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/daraya-hospital-napalm-attack-syria-activist-491921>.

29 Angus McDowall, “Syrian Family, Pupils among Dozens Killed in Aleppo Attacks,” *Reuters*, November 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKBN13F0HS>.

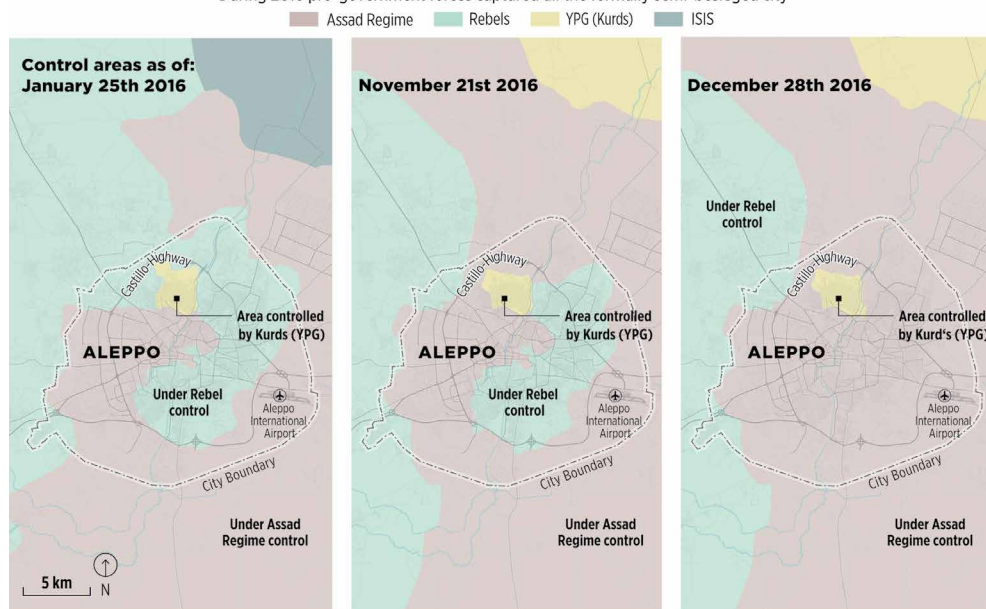
30 “Syrian Army has ‘Split Rebel-Held Eastern Aleppo in Two,’” BBC World Service, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04j88t3>.

31 “Syria Conflict: Rebels Lose Third of East Aleppo Territory,” BBC News, November 28, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38128370>.

32 “Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Calling for Ceasefire in Aleppo,” UN News Center, December 5, 2016, [http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55721#\\_WHPYpZKpA6g](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55721#_WHPYpZKpA6g).

## The Shrinking Aleppo Pocket

During 2016 pro-government forces captured all the formally semi-besieged city



info.BILD.de | Source: Atlantic Council, IHS, OSM

refuge in government-controlled areas held no appeal for those who believed they would end up in a government prison, or grave, if caught.<sup>33</sup> Their desperate pleas were broadcast around the world, and a last-minute reprieve was granted in the form of an evacuation deal agreed between the opposition fighters and Russia.<sup>34</sup>

The evacuation was to begin on the morning of December 14, but the buses were stopped at the last checkpoint by Iranian militants.<sup>35</sup> After knife-edge diplomacy and negotiation, the evacuation got on track, was again stopped, then resumed.<sup>36</sup> More than once, buses were halted for hours, the passengers forced to defecate in the vehicles and in some cases sent back to east Aleppo; others were ordered off the buses—videos leaked online

showed them being robbed at gunpoint.<sup>37</sup>

The surviving civilians who arrived on buses in the west Aleppo countryside were in desperate condition: aid workers reported that they were malnourished, suffering from untreated shrapnel wounds, and deeply traumatized.<sup>38</sup>

As the dust settled and a limited number of western reporters and international aid organizations were allowed into the empty areas, the grim reality was clear. The scale of the physical destruction spoke for itself.<sup>39</sup> There was little left.<sup>40</sup>

On December 22, the Syrian government declared all of Aleppo was back under its control. But there was little rejoicing. What had been done to Aleppo, and the people living there, to bring the city back under Assad's rule, was almost indescribable. The price of control was destruction. The city—that bustling, colorful, vibrant city, the heart of Syria—had been broken.

33 Gianluca Mezzofiore, "Aleppo Activists Post Heartbreaking Goodbye Messages on Twitter," Mashable, December 13, 2016, <http://mashable.com/2016/12/13/aleppo-activists-syria-bana-alabed/>.

34 Anne Barnard, "Battle over Aleppo is Over, Russia Says, as Evacuation Deal Reached," *New York Times*, December 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/world/middleeast/syria-aleppo-civilians.html>.

35 Kareem Shaheen, "Iran-Backed Militias Block Aleppo Evacuation as Shelling Resumes," *Guardian*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/aleppo-residents-evacuation-uncertainty-ceasefire-deal-assad>.

36 Yara Bishara et al., "A Harrowing Evacuation from Aleppo, in Stops and Starts," *New York Times*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/16/world/middleeast/aleppo-evacuations-video.html>.

37 Anne Barnard et al., "Aleppo Evacuation Halted Amid Confusion and Concerns About Killings," December 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/world/middleeast/aleppo-evacuation-assad-syria.html>.

38 Firas al-Khateeb, "East Aleppo Residents Tell of Horror, Cold and Hunger," UNHCR, December 14, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/12/58514cbc8/east-aleppo-residents-tell-horror-cold-hunger.html>.

39 Ian Bray, Twitter post, January 18, 2017, <https://twitter.com/IanOxfam/status/821663712792735744>.

40 Scott Craig, "Restoring East Aleppo's Crippled Clinics," UNHCR, January 9, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/sy/800-restoring-east-aleppos-crippled-clinics.html>.

# Population

Boys cool down with water from a damaged water pipe due to shelling in the rebel held neighbourhood of Sheikh Saeed, in Aleppo, Syria August 20, 2016. Reuters/Abdairhman Ismail

## CIVILIAN OR COMBATANT?

How many people lived in east Aleppo during the siege, and who were they? Reported estimates range from as low as 30,000 to as high as 326,000. The presence of armed groups, in particular a small number of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), was used as a smokescreen by the government and Russia to portray the city's overwhelmingly civilian population as a military threat.

The claim that there were "only militants"<sup>41</sup> was never true of Aleppo. Judging by the numbers who fled the city in the final evacuation, the lowest recorded figure, showed at least 110,000 people lived there throughout the siege, the great majority of them non-combatants, including women, the elderly, the disabled, and children.<sup>42</sup> Even using conservative population estimates, over 90 percent of east Aleppo's people were civilians.

They had many reasons for remaining: a survey of survivors listed explanations including a lack of a safe place to go, a desire to stay with family or to protect property, and a fear they would not be able to return if they left.<sup>43</sup>

41 "President al-Assad to BBC news: We are defending civilians, and making dialogue," SANA, transcript of BBC interview, February 10, 2016, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=28047>.

42 "Syrian Arab Republic: Aleppo - Situation Report No. 13," OCHA, January 12, 2017, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/aleppo\\_sitrep\\_13.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/aleppo_sitrep_13.pdf).

43 "Monitoring of the Protection Situation in Besieged East Aleppo City," Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey), November 2016, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/final\\_draft\\_east\\_aleppo\\_protection\\_monitoring\\_-\\_november\\_2016.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/final_draft_east_aleppo_protection_monitoring_-_november_2016.pdf).

“In most of the areas where the rebels took over, the civilians fled and came to our areas, so in most of the areas that we encircle and attack are only militants.”

**Bashar al-Assad, February 10, 2016**

The distinction between combatants and civilians is fundamental. Deliberately targeting civilians, and conducting indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilian-populated areas, are potential war crimes. Reports in late 2016 from reputable organizations including Human Rights Watch (HRW)<sup>44</sup> and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR)<sup>45</sup> alleged that war crimes had been committed in Aleppo, precisely because of such attacks.

44 "Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo," HRW, December 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>.

45 "Aleppo battle: Raids on Syria city 'probably war crime' UN says," BBC, December 14, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38320647>.

## Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 3.1

Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.

To this end the following acts are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever with respect to the above-mentioned persons:

- (a) violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;
- (b) taking of hostages;
- (c) outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment;
- (d) the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.

### How many people in east Aleppo?

Aleppo's pre-war population was recorded as 2.132 million in the 2004 census and was estimated at 3.164 million in 2011 by the CIA's *World Factbook*. The outbreak of fighting in 2012 led to the division of the city into eastern and western halves, with the government holding the west and a patchwork of opposition forces holding the east. A catalogue of violence was inflicted on, and thus depleted the population of, the east of the city between 2012 and the end of 2015, and by the beginning of 2016 the population of eastern Aleppo was estimated at around 321,995 by the UN.<sup>46</sup>

By the time the first siege of eastern Aleppo began in July 2016, the UN's official, public-facing numbers stated that approximately 275,000 people were living there. As this was the only official population estimate available, it became the go-to number for journalists and politicians alike. According to UN sources, the number came from the UN's Turkey hub, which liaises with the international and Syrian NGOs doing most of the cross-border relief work into the east of the city prior to the siege.

<sup>46</sup> "UNICEF Flash Update Syria Crisis," UNICEF, February 13, 2016.

UN internal population figures, which are disseminated between humanitarian organizations for operational purposes and are broken down by neighborhood and demographic level, stated in October 2016 that around 190,000 people were living in the east, within the borders of the contested front lines.<sup>47</sup>

However, between March and September 2016, the UN Damascus hub was using completely different numbers in its written requests to the government of Syria to send humanitarian convoys to east Aleppo. Its figures ranged between 70,000 (requested in February as a plan for March 2016) and 137,500 (requested in August as a plan for September 2016). On two occasions, the government approved convoys to east Aleppo, but with a lower number of beneficiaries (60,000 both in March and in July 2016) whilst other requests during this period went unapproved. Neither convoy was actually delivered.

Within the UN itself, estimates of the population of east Aleppo came with a variation of 200,000 people. The Local Council for Aleppo City reported 52,498 families in the area and calculated, based on an average family size, that the population was 326,340 people in July 2016, according to Siege Watch. The difference may be explained by the fact that some families reported to the UN protection cluster that they had sent some family members outside the city, while others stayed behind to protect family property,<sup>48</sup> meaning the family size within Aleppo city would be smaller than the family itself.

In short, neither the UN, nor anyone else, had a clear idea of the population of the city during the siege.

Collecting data in all areas of Syria is challenging. Researchers in many areas rely on data from local councils or other bodies, including the government. Restrictions on direct access to beneficiaries, imposed by the government or other players, hinder their ability to verify the data independently. In a report on its own performance in March 2016, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted that reliable data were lacking.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Needs and Population Monitoring Report, UNOCHA (November 2015), [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/assessments/npm\\_report\\_round\\_v\\_november\\_2015.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/assessments/npm_report_round_v_november_2015.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Monitoring of the Protection Situation in Besieged East Aleppo City, November 2016, Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey), [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/final\\_draft\\_east\\_aleppo\\_protection\\_monitoring\\_-\\_november\\_2016.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/final_draft_east_aleppo_protection_monitoring_-_november_2016.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> Lewis Sida, Lorenzo Trombetta and Veronica Panero, Evaluation of OCHA Response to the Syria Crisis (March 2016), [https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OCHA%20Syria%20Evaluation%20Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OCHA%20Syria%20Evaluation%20Report_FINAL.pdf).

Some indication of the population of eastern Aleppo during the siege can be deduced from the numbers of those who fled the city at its end. The number of people who registered as Internally Displaced People (IDPs) following the evacuation of east Aleppo was put at more than 111,000 on January 12, 2017.<sup>50</sup> This figure includes those who fled, and those who remained in their homes and registered with UN agencies. Not all those leaving the city will have registered, and others may not have been accounted for, so the total is probably higher than this figure, though by how much is unclear.

Much has been made of the discrepancy between the numbers, in particular by supporters of the government. However, while the issue deserves attention and discussion, and there are lessons that can be drawn from the example, it in no way changes the substantive issue of what occurred in east Aleppo throughout the conflict, and most especially during the final months, weeks, and days of the city.

It is safe to say that tens of thousands of people—certainly more than 111,000 and perhaps as many as 200,000—lived in the city during the siege. It is against this human background that the breaking of Aleppo must be viewed.

### Who lived, and died, in east Aleppo?

The second question raised about the people of east Aleppo concerns who they were, and what relationship they had to designated terrorist groups.

At the time of the September ceasefire, Staffan de Mistura, the UN’s special envoy to Syria, estimated that 8,000 opposition fighters were in the east, of whom around 900 were affiliated with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.<sup>51</sup> Based on the lowest credible population figure, 110,000, this would indicate that less than 10 percent of the population of east Aleppo were fighters.

Western diplomats disputed de Mistura’s figures for the number of JFS fighters at the time, telling Reuters the real figure was in the region of 100–200.<sup>52</sup> The opposition offensive in late October, designed to

break the siege, also certainly included JFS fighters, though how many is unclear.<sup>53</sup>

However, de Mistura’s figures for the overall number of fighters were not challenged in the same way. These figures should always be borne in mind when considering the military actions conducted throughout east Aleppo. At a conservative estimate, over ninety percent of the people in east Aleppo during the siege were non-combatants.

Despite this, the Syrian government and its allies consistently treated east Aleppo and its people as combatants, guilty until proven innocent.

One telling indicator of this approach was the way the government of Syria provided its breakdown of those in east Aleppo to the UN, when negotiations for medical evacuations were taking place during potential ceasefires.

The government classified each group with regard to its relationship to the Syrian Government (GoS) and “armed opposition groups” (AOGs):

A	<b>Not affiliated with AOGs; cleared by GoS</b>	People/patients who have been cleared by the security apparatus and can easily travel between east and west Aleppo to obtain public health care services.
B	<b>Affiliated with AoG</b>	Family members of people affiliated with AoG may fear persecution if they cross from east to west Aleppo. However, records show that regardless of their affiliation, no woman or child from east Aleppo has been turned away from health-care facilities in west Aleppo. These patients have been able to stay for up to one month in west Aleppo for the purpose of receiving health care.
C	<b>Members of AOGs</b>	Current combatants may be the subject of the latest Amnesty announced by the President of Syria on 28 July 2016. They have the option of either 1) leaving east Aleppo for Idlib or rural Aleppo or 2) staying inside east Aleppo.

The three categories are: “not affiliated with AOGs, cleared by the government”; “affiliated with AOGs”;

50 “Syrian Arab Republic: Aleppo - Situation Report No. 13,” OCHA, January 12, 2017, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/aleppo\\_sitrep\\_13.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/aleppo_sitrep_13.pdf).

51 Raf Sanchez, “UN Diplomat Offers to Personally Escort 900 al-Qaeda Fighters Out of Aleppo in Hope of Ending Bombing,” *Telegraph*, October 6, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/06/un-diplomat-offers-to-personally-escort-900-al-qaeda-fighters-ou/>.

52 Tom Miles, “Aleppo’s Jabhat Fateh al-Sham Fighters Far Fewer than U.N. Says: Sources,” *Reuters*, October 14, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKBN12E0R6>.

53 “Who’s Involved in the Rebels’ Aleppo Offensive? The Cliff-Notes,” *The New Arab*, October 28, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2016/10/28/whos-involved-in-the-rebels-aleppo-offensive-the-cliff-notes>.

and “members of AOGs.” Thus, individuals could only be viewed as civilians if they had been cleared by the government. International humanitarian law defines a civilian as “any person who is not a member of armed forces.”<sup>54</sup> In east Aleppo, the definition of a civilian was effectively narrowed down to “a person cleared by the government.”

Assad himself gave an early indication of this stance in an interview given to the BBC in February 2015:

*Q: Can we talk about the humanitarian situation a little bit? One of the effective military tactics your... the Syrian Army has used, is to isolate areas held by rebels, and effectively to starve them out. But that has had the effect also to starve the civilians, and that, again, is against the laws of war, starving civilians.*

*A: That's not correct for one reason, because in most of the areas where the rebels took over, the civilians fled and came to our areas, so in most of the areas that we encircle and attack are only militants.*<sup>55</sup>

Yet, the great majority of Aleppo's people were not militants, and they did not stay to fight. In November 2016, the UN's “protection cluster,” part of the Turkey hub, conducted a survey of residents within east Aleppo and asked why they had stayed in the war-torn city. Many reasons were given, from the lack of a safe place to go, to a need to stay with family. “Others noted that they did not want to leave their city or their country, that they had lived there for a long time, that they deserved to live in their houses, that they made up their mind at the beginning of the conflict and still insisted to stay, that their livelihood was inside east Aleppo city, and that they ‘did not want the Government of Syria to enter their area,’ and that they did not want to meet the same fate as Darayya.”<sup>56</sup>

Every demographic group could find reasons to stay. Many young men of fighting age wished to avoid conscription into the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), where mandatory service continues. A recently published list of those in Aleppo who had dodged conscription numbered 66,000. It was published by a Syrian news outlet called Zaman al-wasl, which said that the list was issued by a military court.

Such lists should not be taken at face value. However, the names of over a dozen east Aleppo residents who are known to have avoided the draft were checked against the database, and they showed up in all cases, suggesting the list is, indeed, legitimate.<sup>57</sup> In many cases, men such as these sent their families to government-held areas for safety, but could not follow, for fear they would face instant conscription—a fear that was justified in some cases.<sup>58</sup>

Others did not leave because they could not. The UN's November survey reported that nearly 4 percent of respondents were disabled.<sup>59</sup> During the evacuation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) found 150 mostly elderly and incapacitated people within a former elder care home in the Old City of Aleppo and rescued them at great personal risk.<sup>60</sup>

Children, too, were in east Aleppo. Unfortunately, their presence was often highlighted only when they came to harm. In August, the image of little Omran Daqneesh went viral when he was pulled from the rubble after an attack in Aleppo and lifted into an ambulance, bloodied and bemused.<sup>61</sup> Images of an attack in Hanano on November 18, thought to have been committed using chlorine gas, showed dozens of children with breathing difficulties; footage of people fleeing Hanano into Sheikh Maqsood during the offensive in late November showed many children among the crowds.<sup>62</sup> Seven-year-old Bana al-Abed was living in the besieged city with her mother, when they began tweeting about their experiences. As a later chapter will discuss, Bana was attacked bitterly by government supporters as a result; the fact remains that a young child was present in Aleppo and was a direct witness to the indiscriminate strikes.

Still others stayed to help. Twenty-nine NGOs, both international and Syrian, were operating

54 “Rule 5. Definition of Civilians,” ICRC, April 22, 2010, [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_cha\\_chapter1\\_rule5](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_cha_chapter1_rule5).

55 Full transcript from SANA: <http://sana.sy/en/?p=28047>.

56 Monitoring of the Protection Situation in Besieged East Aleppo City, November 2016, Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey).

57 “إهدير و بلح يف هيم ازلال امدخل باب قاحتلال ال نيبولطم” Zaman Alwasl, July 9, 2016, <http://leaks.zamanalwsl.net/matlobeen-aleppo.php>.

58 Omar Ghabra, Twitter post, December 13, 2016, <https://twitter.com/omarghabra/status/808528027810287617>.

59 Monitoring of the Protection Situation in Besieged East Aleppo City, November 2016, Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey).

60 “SARC and ICRC Evacuate 150 Civilians from Aleppo Frontline,” ICRC, December 8, 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/sarc-and-icrc-evacuate-150-civilians-aleppo-frontline>.

61 Ziad Jaber, Ammar Cheikh Omar and Alexander Smith, “Cameraman Who Filmed Omran Daqneesh's Rescue in Aleppo Recounts Boy's Silence,” NBC News, August 23, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/aleppo-children/cameraman-who-filmed-omran-daqneesh-s-rescue-aleppo-recounts-boy-n636561>.

62 Twitter search on “hanano,” <https://twitter.com/AhmadAlkhtib/status/802908778605715456>.

in east Aleppo during the siege. Each had staff in the area; in some cases, they had tens of workers. Journalists, too, stayed to report, despite the danger of imprisonment and death.<sup>63</sup> A number of reporters, for outlets ranging from the wires Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), and Anadolu, through to Aleppo 24 and “on the ground” news reporters, were inside the siege. Activists were also plentiful, tweeting and “whatsapping” images to reporters and the world at large. Again, these commentators met with a savage response from the besieging powers, who portrayed them as parties to the conflict.


None of these was a combatant, despite attempts by pro-government commentators to portray them as such. All the evidence shows that east Aleppo was, and remained, an overwhelmingly civilian-populated area throughout the siege. It should have been treated as such.

As this report will show, it was not.

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63 “107 Journalists Killed in Syria since 1992/Motive Confirmed,” Committee to Protect Journalists, <https://cpj.org/killed/mideast/syria/>.

# Siege



A fire casts light on Syrians who have evacuated from eastern Aleppo, as they have a meal in a shelter with a riddled wall in government controlled Jibreen area in Aleppo, Syria November 30, 2016. Reuters/Omar Sanadiki

## BESIEGE, ASSAULT, EVACUATE: THE “KNEEL OR STARVE” STRATEGY

Syria’s cities have been one of Assad’s greatest challenges. It was in the cities that his opponents, often untrained and lightly armed, were best able to challenge the regime; but, allowing Syria’s largest cities to fall posed a grave strategic risk to his rule. Once the initial crackdown failed to break the opposition’s resistance, the regime turned to siege tactics.

Throughout the conflict, more than forty localities have been besieged, most in the suburbs of Damascus and Homs. Following Russia’s military intervention in 2015, and particularly from the summer of 2016, key sieges were intensified into air and ground assaults. This ultimately forced the opposition to accept evacuation or “reconciliation” deals, which left the shattered shells of their former strongholds once more in government hands.

The siege that broke Aleppo followed this pattern. It began in July with cutting off Castello Road, the crucial approach road leading into the northeast

of the city. It was contested by the opposition, and then progressively tightened by the regime, through the fall, before a heavy military offensive forced the residents into an evacuation deal in midwinter.

Aleppo was the largest and most strategically important city to fall to this strategy, but it was not the first; nor, given the success of the campaign, is it likely to be the last. As such, it is vital to situate Aleppo within the broader strategy of “kneel or starve” employed across Syria, and to understand the policies and tactics used.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Erika Solomon, “Dozens die of hunger in besieged Syrian town,” *Financial Times*, January 8, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/ebeea442-b5ec-11e5-8358-9a82b43f6b2f>



## Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 23

Each High Contracting Party shall allow the free passage of all consignments of medical and hospital stores and objects necessary for religious worship intended only for civilians of another High Contracting Party, even if the latter is its adversary. It shall likewise permit the free passage of all consignments of essential foodstuffs, clothing and tonics intended for children under fifteen, expectant mothers and maternity cases.

### Besiege, Assault, Evacuate

Sieges were characteristic of this conflict from its early days. In late 2012, Assad's forces laid siege to Darayya and Moadamiya, close to Damascus. Further sieges were imposed on Old Homs in 2012 and east Ghouta and elsewhere throughout 2013 and 2014. Additional sieges were imposed on Madaya, Zabadani, and elsewhere in 2015. As early as 2013, graffiti scrawled by pro-government fighters characterized the sieges with the motto, "Kneel or starve."<sup>65</sup>

Not all of the sieges were imposed by Assad's forces: Kafrya and Foua, two Shia towns in the Idlib countryside, have been besieged by opposition forces since 2015, and Deir Ezzour has been besieged by ISIS since 2015.

Across Syria, residents of at least thirty-nine different areas have been subject to siege warfare at different times throughout the conflict.<sup>66</sup> While not all have been recognized as sieges by the UN, they have been exhaustively monitored by the advocacy group Siege Watch.<sup>67</sup>

Of the thirty-nine, only three were besieged by opposition groups. Siege Watch counted over 1.3 million people living under siege, and an additional 1.1 million people facing the threat of siege. In August 2016, the UN's reporting identified 590,200 people as being under siege, a number

65 Anne Barnard, "Stick Figures and Stunted Growth as Warring Syria Goes Hungry," *New York Times*, November 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/world/middleeast/stick-figures-and-stunted-growth-as-warring-syria-goes-hungry.html>.

66 Siege Watch: Fourth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria (October-August 2016), The Syria Institute and PAX for Peace, <https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-TSI-Syria-SiegeWatch-report-4.pdf>.

67 Siege Watch: Fourth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria (February 2016), The Syria Institute and PAX for Peace, <https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>.

that was revised to 974,080 as of November 1, after extensive pressure by Siege Watch.

Wherever the sieges were imposed, they brought mass suffering. Unable to travel freely in and out of the siege areas, residents suffered restrictions on food and essential medical equipment. In January 2016, the UN entered Madaya for the first time since the siege began, to find children starving to death.<sup>68</sup> The reports they had heard about children eating grass or making "stone soup" were true.

The starvation appears to have been premeditated and systematic. The Syrian government's control over the dissemination of aid ensured that sieges, once begun, were difficult to penetrate, even for humanitarian organizations.

According to Jan Egeland, the chair of the UN International Syria Support Group's Humanitarian Task Force, humanitarian aid met a monthly average of just 21 percent of the needs of people in besieged areas in 2016.<sup>69</sup> Despite repeated UN Security Council resolutions,<sup>70</sup> aid never flowed freely. Each month, the UN asked the Syrian government permission to access these areas; each month, it was denied in the majority of cases.<sup>71</sup> When convoys were allowed to enter, medical supplies and equipment were often removed by government forces. Food and nutritional items were often not allowed on the convoy in the first place.<sup>72</sup>

The Syrian government steadily increased its stranglehold on the country's besieged areas. Speaking on January 3, 2017, Egeland said: "In December [2016], we had only one convoy going to one place, one place only, Khan Elshih, and it became our worst month in that respect since

68 "Madaya Syria: Aid Convoy Reaches Besieged Town," BBC News, January 11, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35278173>.

69 "Note to Correspondents: Transcript of Joint Stakeout by UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and Senior Advisor Jan Egeland," UN Secretary General, January 5, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-01-05/note-correspondents-transcript-joint-stakeout-un-special>.

70 In particular, resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015).

71 Nick Hopkins, "More than 80% of UN Aid Convoys in Syria Blocked or Delayed," *Guardian*, September 30, 2016, [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/30/syria-un-aid-convoys-more-than-four-fifths-blocked-delayed-september](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/30/syria-un-aid-convoys-more-than-four-fifths-blocked-delayed-september).

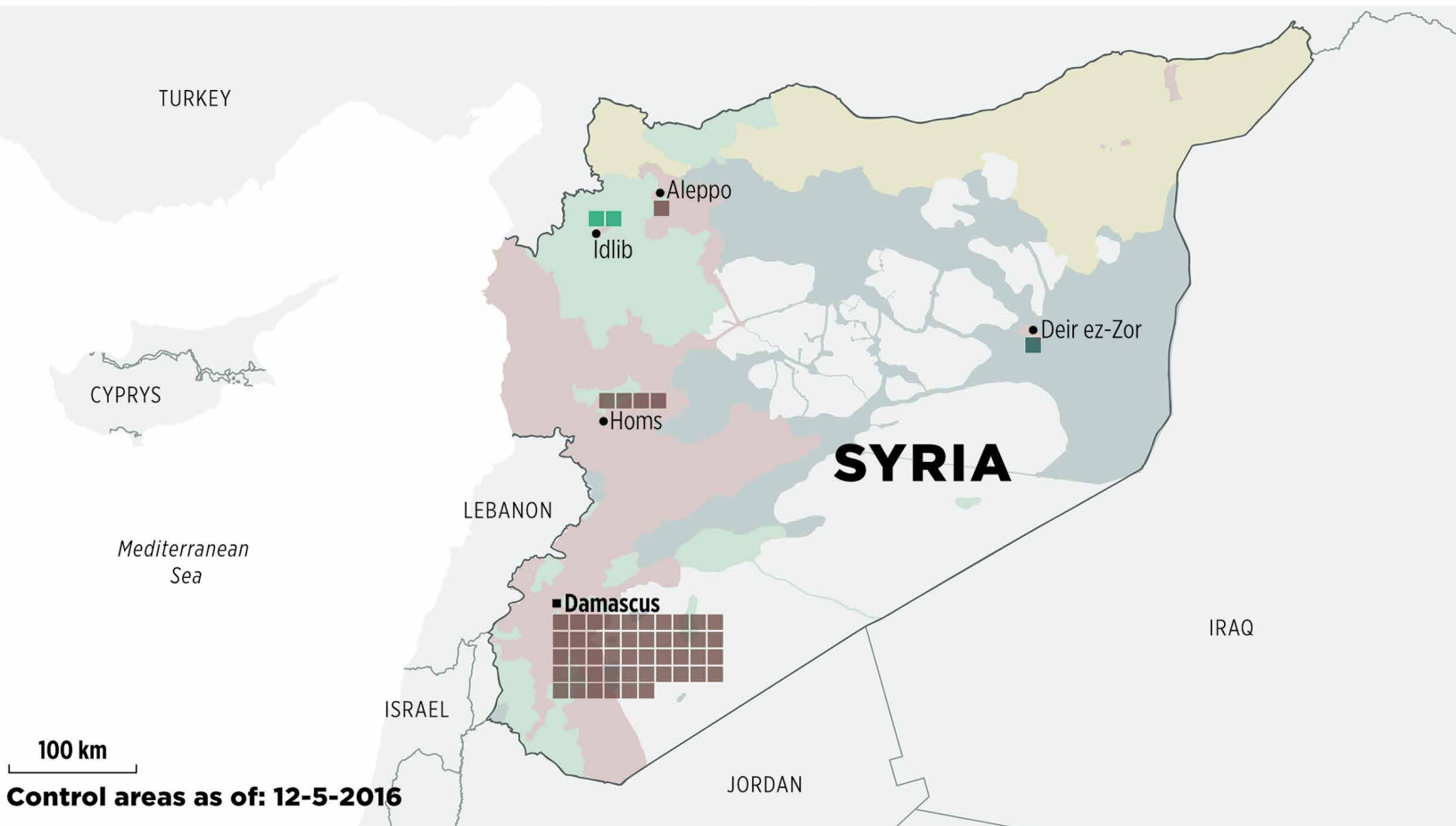
72 Emma Beals and Nick Hopkins, "Lifesaving UN Aid Regularly Fails to Reach Besieged Syrians," *Guardian*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/12/life-saving-un-aid-regularly-fails-reach-besieged-syrians>.

## Besieged Areas in Syria 2016

Most areas with restricted access across Syria are besieged by the Assad Regime

Number of besieged Neighborhoods: ■ by Assad Regime ■ by Rebels ■ by ISIS

■ Assad Regime ■ Rebels ■ YPG (Kurds) ■ ISIS



info.BILD.de | Source: Atlantic Council, IHS, OSM

the task force was created.”<sup>73</sup> Khan Elshih had not previously been described as besieged by the UN.

In some cases, local forces used the siege to line their pockets. Local businessmen both inside and outside the sieges used them to gain status and wealth. This power play was strategically advantageous to the government, which gained and maintained allies through its ability to channel and control the flow of aid.<sup>74</sup> Hezbollah forces were even harsher in their application of siege strategy

in Madaya and Zabadani.<sup>75</sup>

However, sieges can be cumbersome and slow. In August 2016, a change of strategy by the government ended the four-year siege of Darayya when the starvation policy gave way to a decisive, “scorched earth” offensive that pressured residents into accepting an evacuation deal. The victory appeared to embolden the pro-government forces to try the same technique in other areas.

<sup>73</sup> “Note to Correspondents: Transcript of Joint Stakeout by UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and Senior Advisor Jan Egeland.”

<sup>74</sup> Will Todman, “Sieges in Syria: Profiteering from Misery,” Middle East Institute, June 14, 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/sieges-syria-profiteering-misery>.

<sup>75</sup> “Syria: 10-Year-Old Girl to Receive Urgent Surgery Following Evacuation from Besieged Madaya,” Amnesty International, August 14, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/08/syria-10-year-old-girl-to-receive-urgent-surgery-following-evacuation-from-besieged-madaya/>.

## Aleppo under siege

Aleppo itself was not fully besieged until mid-2016. On July 27, the SAA and allied forces finally took control of Castello Road, the coveted and beleaguered approach road into the northeast of the city. Opposition forces retaliated on August 6 by taking Ramousah Road in the southwest, though their hold was shaky and the road was constantly shelled. This effectively besieged the government-held west of the city, illustrating the no-win situation presented to civilians on both sides.

On August 26—the same day that Darayya fell<sup>76</sup>—the government launched a campaign to retake Ramousah. On September 4, the assault succeeded. From then on, east Aleppo was cut off.

Due to the constant threat of siege, humanitarian agencies had stockpiled three months' worth of food in east Aleppo by mid-July. These supplies were rationed out until December. The reprieve in August, under a temporary ceasefire, saw a limited number of small aid shipments from NGOs enter the city, but the road was under constant shelling, so only a limited amount of supplies got in. Despite repeated requests for access, UN aid was blocked entirely.

The cost of goods in east Aleppo rose exponentially as the siege went on. Market data collected by the international NGO, MercyCorps, tracked the cost of essential household items in east Aleppo through the last nine months of 2016. As the siege dragged on, toward the end of 2016, the items doubled in cost, and sometimes increased in price by as much as eight times.

But Aleppo was not destined to endure the long, drawn-out suffering of a siege: its agony was to be shorter and sharper. The methods used to break Darayya, and before that Old Homs, were repeated on a larger scale. Encirclement was followed by a sustained bombardment that struck civilian facilities, including hospitals, repeatedly. Indiscriminate air attacks multiplied, including the documented use of chlorine gas, cluster munitions, and incendiaries. The nature and scale of these attacks is documented elsewhere in this report.

Two months after the circle of siege was in place, the final ground offensive began. It was brutal and decisive. Government forces advanced rapidly.

<sup>76</sup> Anne Barnard, "Residents Abandon Daraya as Government Seizes a Symbol of Syria's Rebellion," *New York Times*, August 26, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/27/world/middleeast/syria-daraya-falls-symbol-rebellion.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/27/world/middleeast/syria-daraya-falls-symbol-rebellion.html?_r=0).

Many residents fled; those who did not think they were safe with the government bunched up into the remaining, ever-decreasing space. Families sought shelter wherever they could find it. As the temperature dropped, conditions for those remaining dropped along with them.

As in Darayya, the pressure brought to bear on the civilian population ultimately broke the resistance. In the final weeks of the siege, and especially after the hospitals had been bombarded, the civilians of east Aleppo demanded an end to their suffering. According to a report by the NGO Violations Documentation Center (VDC) that documents casualties in Syria: "Civilians in the city clearly demanded the leaders of armed groups to initiate the negotiations with the government forces in order to reach a ceasefire and give civilians the chance to evacuate the Eastern neighborhoods."<sup>77</sup>

A further chapter will detail east Aleppo's final days, and the evacuation and suffering that followed. Here, it need only be said that by the time residents finally made it to safety through the evacuation operation, their general condition was described as "exhausted and traumatized by the journey, danger, [and] emotions of having to leave everything behind."<sup>78</sup>

Aleppo was broken. The strategy of besiege, assault, evacuate had worked.

<sup>77</sup> Special Report on the Evacuation of Civilians from East Aleppo (January 2017), Violations Documentation Center in Syria, <http://vdc-sy.net/Website/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Aleppo-report-En-.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Zena Tahhan, "East Aleppo 'Catastrophic' as Tens of Thousands Flee," *Al Jazeera*, November 30, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/east-aleppo-catastrophic-tens-thousands-flee-161130093810926.html>.

# Ceasefires



Men drive a motorcycle near a damaged aid truck after an airstrike on the rebel held Urm al-Kubra town, western Aleppo city, Syria September 20, 2016. Reuters/Ammar Abdullah

## FALSE HOPES

In line with priorities that shifted toward a reduction in violence, ceasefires have been an increasingly large part of international diplomacy around Syria. The country saw four in 2016: a cessation of hostilities in February, a brief ceasefire around the festival of Eid in July, a ceasefire negotiated by the US and Russia in September, and the final Aleppo ceasefire in December, which paved the way for a nationwide ceasefire in January.

Most of these pauses were used by the warring parties to jostle for position and credibility, both on the ground and among the shifting global diplomatic sands.

While the reduction in violence during each ceasefire temporarily alleviated suffering across the country, in most cases the ceasefires were used by the government and its allies to gain ground or position themselves for future operations. Tracking the ceasefires in Aleppo throughout 2016 provides useful context and an insight into the way ceasefires played into the warring parties' broader strategic aims.

## February Cessation of Hostilities

The US and Russia reached agreement on February 22, 2016, for a nationwide cessation of hostilities to begin on February 27.<sup>79</sup> The agreement did not apply to either ISIS or the Nusra Front, but applied to the opposition and government alike. The agreement also stipulated that there must be unimpeded humanitarian aid access to all areas.

The ceasefire represented the greatest reduction in violence seen in Syria in 2016, but it was never wholly successful. As early as the morning of February 27, airstrikes and clashes were reported.<sup>80</sup> While overall violence was initially reduced, there were constant reports of violations and these increased in number from day to day. Within weeks, observers monitoring the cessation of hostilities declared it all but over. Diplomats continued to insist on the importance of the ceasefire, and to reaffirm its existence,<sup>81</sup> but the reality on the ground was that it had lost all meaning by the end of April.

In Aleppo, government strikes continued throughout the period of the ceasefire. Ostensibly aimed at the Nusra Front, these in fact struck a wide range of targets, including civilians and opposition groups, in what has been termed a “relentless” series of violations.<sup>82</sup> By late April, the government was striking the opposition-held half of the city with heavy bombing, including on hospitals.

## July—Eid Ceasefire

For the religious observance of Eid, a “regime of calm” was “implemented across all territory of the Syrian Arab Republic for a period of 72 hours from 1 a.m. on July 6 until 2400 on July 8, 2016.”<sup>83</sup>

The regime of calm never lived up to its name. The government and its supporters (Hezbollah, Russia,

and Iranian militias) used the three-day window to attack the approach road to Aleppo and work toward bringing about the siege of the city.<sup>84</sup> On the morning of July 6, within hours of the beginning of the ceasefire, there were reports of attacks on the area around the Castello Road.<sup>85</sup> Throughout the ceasefire, fierce fighting was reported in and around the same area, the north of the city.

The result of the period of calm was to further loosen the opposition forces’ hold on the lifeline road linking east Aleppo with the outside world. As soon as the Eid pause ended, the offensive resumed, with one objective: besieging the city. Just three weeks after the beginning of the ceasefire, the Castello Road was cut, and east Aleppo was under siege.

## September—Nationwide Ceasefire

In September 2016, Russia and the United States agreed on another ceasefire; they agreed that if it held for a week, the two countries would cooperate on military activities against ISIS and the Nusra Front.

The ceasefire began at sundown on September 12, and was intended to hold for forty-eight hours initially, with a forty-eight-hour extension if peace was maintained. While the ceasefire was nationwide, the agreement text was heavily oriented toward east Aleppo.<sup>86</sup> It did not include the area around the Ramousah Road, which had been retaken by government forces not long before. Each side clearly feared that the other would use the ceasefire to advance their military position; given the way in which the Eid ceasefire had been abused, this was unsurprising.

The ceasefire included humanitarian aid access across the country, and set out in detail how the aid was to be allowed into east Aleppo. Sealed trucks were to leave Turkey via the Bab al-Hawa crossing, carrying boxes packed under the supervision of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UN observers. Trucks were to enter Aleppo under Russian military supervision via Castello Road.

The Syrian government, which had been extensively briefed on the plan before the ceasefire was agreed, repeatedly refused to give permission for the aid convoy to leave the Turkish border, despite

79 “Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria,” US Department of State, February 22, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/253115.htm>.

80 Syria Ceasefire Monitor, <http://www.syriaceasefiremonitor.org/page/5>.

81 Mark C. Toner, “Reaffirming the Cessation of Hostilities in Aleppo, Syria,” US Department of State, May 4, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/256865.htm>.

82 Faysal Itani and Hossam Abouzahr, “At What Point is a Cessation of Hostilities Broken?,” Atlantic Council, April 19, 2016, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/at-what-point-is-a-cessation-of-hostilities-broken](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/at-what-point-is-a-cessation-of-hostilities-broken).

83 “Syrian Army, Rebels Agree to 72-Hour Eid Truce, But Fighting Continues,” Reuters, July 6, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-truce-idUSKCN0ZMOPZ>.

84 “C\_Military1,” Twitter post, July 8, 2016, [https://twitter.com/C\\_Military1/status/751540282714427392](https://twitter.com/C_Military1/status/751540282714427392).

85 “Syrian Government ‘Violates’ Eid Ceasefire,” Al Jazeera, July 6, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/syrian-government-declares-day-ceasefire-160706091945528.html>.

86 “AP EXCLUSIVE: Text of Syria Cease-Fire Deal,” Associated Press, September 22, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/f5428d60326c4394a1c95efcefad8d77/ap-exclusive-text-syria-cease-fire-deal>.

multiple UNSC resolutions.<sup>87</sup> Fighting groups and the Local Council inside Aleppo also disputed the route of the aid convoy, arguing that it legitimized the siege for the trucks to be allowed in via the Castello Road under Russian military supervision.

Carefully planned movements were negotiated to ensure both sides withdrew from their positions near the Castello Road to allow the aid access, but trust in each other and the process was lacking, and the implementation of the withdrawal from the Castello Road positions was slow and painful. After several days, the food items in the trucks perished, undelivered.<sup>88</sup>

On September 17, the US struck SAA positions near Deir Ezzour during an airstrike the American military said was aimed at ISIS fighters in the area (strikes on ISIS were in accordance with the ceasefire exemption). The US had never struck SAA positions before and claimed the strike was accidental; despite a swift US apology, Assad accused the Americans of deliberately targeting his forces,<sup>89</sup> and Kremlin media outlet RT expanded on the accusation.<sup>90</sup> The diplomatic tension worsened at a fiery UN Security Council meeting in which the US and Russian representatives accused one another of hypocrisy, cynicism, and unprecedented heavy-handedness.<sup>91</sup>

The final blow to the ceasefire came on September 19, when a Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) convoy of humanitarian aid, approved by the Syrian government and Russia, left government-held west Aleppo<sup>92</sup> for an area in the opposition-held west Aleppo countryside, crossing the front lines to gain access. At 19:30 local time, the convoy was struck by heavy fire. Twenty people were killed and eighteen trucks destroyed. Despite denials by the Syrian government and Russian Ministry

of Defense, multiple investigations into the event leave little room for doubt that Russia or the Syrian air force were responsible for the bombing.<sup>93</sup> The Russian and Syrian governments denied even the suggestion that they might have been involved and hurled accusations at the other parties to the conflict. The bombing marked the end of an already crumbling ceasefire.

Immediately prior to the ceasefire, government troops had taken territories in southern Aleppo. Just three days after the strike on the aid convoy, the Syrian government announced the launch of its final operation to retake east Aleppo. Given the amount of time necessary to prepare such a large-scale assault, it seems clear that the government used the ceasefire to build up its forces, while simultaneously preventing aid from reaching east Aleppo.

### **December—Final Ceasefire**

Aleppo's final ceasefire was announced on December 14. After weeks of heavy military pressure, less than 5 percent of the east Aleppo enclave remained in opposition hands. At the request of opposition forces, a ceasefire was reached as part of an evacuation deal on December 14, 2016, bringing an end to the hostilities in the area once and for all.

The ceasefires of 2016 brought some respite to the people of Aleppo. In certain areas, and for limited periods of time, they led to a reduction in violence. But, as measures to build trust and pave the way for a larger settlement, they failed.

While the February ceasefire had a significant impact in reducing the levels of violence across Syria, the Eid period of calm appears to have been little more than a strategic deception by the Assad government, used as part of a deliberate military operation to close the ring around Aleppo. The September ceasefire never came close to overcoming the warring parties' mutual mistrust, and crumbled after the US strike on Syrian forces, and the Syrian/Russian strike on the SARC convoy. Only the final ceasefire held, and that because one side had so clearly won the battle.

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87 UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (December 18, 2015), [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254(2015)).

88 Riam Dalati, Twitter post, September 13, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/775809063913336832>.

89 Bethan McKernan, "Assad: US Air Strikes on Syrian Army Base Were 'Definitely Intentional,'" *Independent*, September 22, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-assad-us-air-strikes-intentional-a7322901.html>.

90 "'Unbelievable' That US Strike on Syrian Army Was Mistake - fmr MI5 Agent," RT, September 17, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/359690-us-syria-airstrike-unlikely-unintentional/>.


91 Time Hume et al., "Syria Ceasefire under Threat after US-Led Strikes Kill Regime Troops, Russia Says," *CNN*, September 18, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/18/middleeast/syria-claims-coalition-airstrike-hit-regime-forces/>.

92 UNOCHA Syria, Twitter post, September 19, 2016, [https://twitter.com/OCHA\\_Syria/status/777801927501447168?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/OCHA_Syria/status/777801927501447168?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).

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93 Loveluck and Gibbons-Neff, "Why Did They Wait to Kill Us?"; Nick Waters and Hady al-Khatib, "Analysis of Syrian Red Crescent Aid Convoy Attack," *Bellingcat*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/21/aleppo-un-aid-analysis/>.

# Attacks Overview

A photograph showing a person standing in a street completely covered in rubble and debris. The air is thick with smoke and dust, obscuring the background. The person is wearing a dark jacket and pants, and is looking towards the camera. The scene is one of devastation and the aftermath of conflict.

Smoke and flames rise after air strikes on rebel-controlled besieged area of Aleppo, as seen from a government-held side, in Syria December 11, 2016. Source: Reuters/Omar Sanadiki

## INDISCRIMINATE AERIAL ATTACKS ON ALEPPO

Indiscriminate aerial attacks have rained down across Syria throughout the conflict. In Aleppo, they began in 2012. They increased significantly in December 2013, and when Russia entered the conflict in earnest in September 2015, and once again through the final months of 2016, both the number of attacks and the variety of weapons used expanded.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Aleppo was hit by 4,045 barrel bombs in 2016, with 225 falling in December alone.<sup>94</sup> A record of attacks compiled by the first responder organization Syrian Civil Defence, known as the “White Helmets,” covering the period from September 19, 2016 until the evacuation in mid-December showed 823 distinct reported incidents, ranging from cluster-munition attacks to barrel bombs.

By comparing satellite images of the east of the city taken on October 18 with those taken on September 19, HRW was able to identify 950 new

distinct impact sites—an average of more than one blast an hour, day and night, for a month.<sup>95</sup> Over the course of the year, the SNHR recorded 506 civilian fatalities from barrel bomb attacks, including 140 children and 63 women.<sup>96</sup> Separately, the Violations Documentation Center recorded the death by military action of 3,497 civilians in Aleppo from June to mid-December 2016.<sup>97</sup>

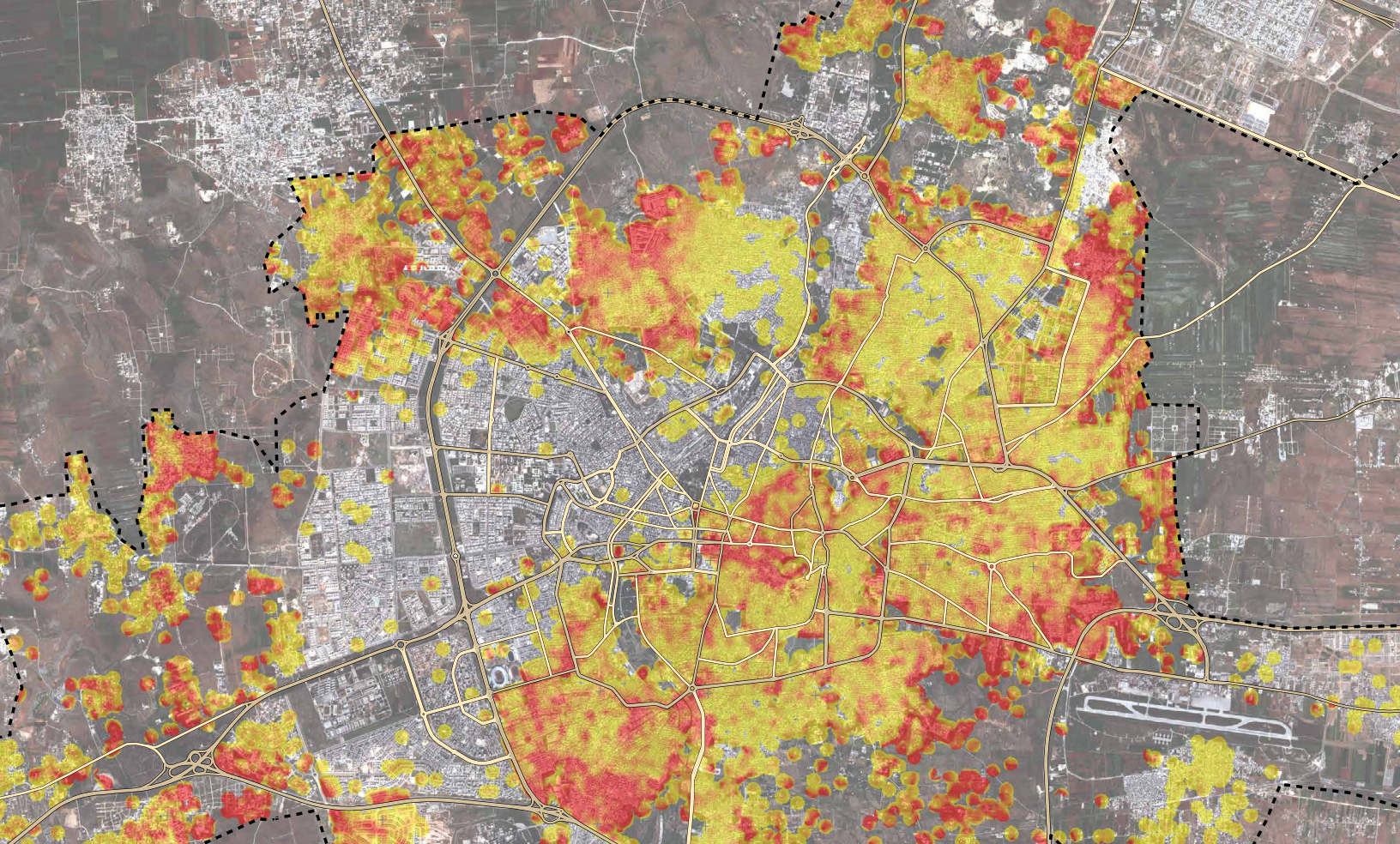
This evidence was gathered by multiple, independent witnesses using a variety of sources, from on-the-ground contacts up to satellite photographs. The sources reinforce and corroborate one another. They reveal a collage of thousands of mostly indiscriminate attacks, and their devastating impact on life and death in Aleppo during the siege.

94 “No Less than 12,958 Barrel Bombs Dropped in 2016,,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, January 9, 2017, [http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At\\_least\\_12958\\_barrels\\_explosive\\_in\\_2016\\_en.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At_least_12958_barrels_explosive_in_2016_en.pdf).

95 “Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo,” Human Rights Watch, December 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>

96 “No less than 12,958 Barrel Bombs Dropped in 2016,” Syrian Network Human Rights, January 9, 2017, <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2017/01/09/30900/>

97 “Special Report on the Evacuation of Civilians from East Aleppo,” Center for Documentation of Violations, January 6, 2017, <http://vdc-sy.net/Website/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Aleppo-report-En-.pdf>



This map illustrates the percentage of buildings damaged in the city of Aleppo determined by satellite image analysis. Using satellite imagery acquired September 1, 2016, May 1, 2015, April 26, 2015, May 23, 2014, September 23, 2013, and November 21, 2010, UNOSAT identified a total of 33,521 damaged structures within the extent of this map. These damaged structures are compared with total numbers of buildings found in a pre-conflict satellite image collected in 2009 to determine the percentage of damaged buildings across the city. Source: UNITAR-UNOSAT is licensed under a CC BY-NC 3.0

The scale of attacks on Aleppo makes it almost impossible to compile a robust and verified record of every attack on the city. But drawing on a broad range of information, it is possible to see that an extensive aerial campaign was waged in Aleppo, and that a high proportion of the munitions deployed against the city and its population were indiscriminate.

The indiscriminate strikes were not one-sided; armed opposition groups also engaged in rocket attacks on civilians in western, government-held Aleppo. Casualty numbers are more difficult to find, but the SNHR reported sixty-four civilian deaths during the period from April 20 to April 29, 2016,<sup>98</sup> and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights recorded seventy-four civilian deaths during the opposition offensive to break the siege of Aleppo in late October 2016.<sup>99</sup> The indiscriminate nature of the attacks is equally disturbing, and

98 “Armed Opposition Factions’ Attacks on Neighbourhoods in Aleppo City,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, May 11, 2016, <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/05/11/21644/>.

99 “Civilians Killed by Rebel Fire in West Aleppo: Monitor,” Al Jazeera, November 6, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/civilians-killed-rebel-fire-west-aleppo-monitor-161106061327127.html>.

subject to analysis and judgement under the same international laws as any other attack on civilians in the conflict. However, there is little equivalence between the two sides when considering the scale and resources employed in the conflict.


Using satellite imagery of Aleppo from 2010 through to 2016, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) Operational Satellite Applications Program (UNOSAT) was able to identify 33,521 damaged structures by September 18, 2016. The damage is primarily located in opposition held areas of east Aleppo, and the countryside.<sup>100</sup>

Every indiscriminate attack is worthy of investigation. However, for the sake of brevity and specificity, the following chapters will focus in detail on particularly pernicious sub-categories of the attacks on east Aleppo: strikes on hospitals and medical facilities; incendiary weapons; cluster munitions and other explosive munitions; and chemical weapons.

100 UNOSAT, December 20, 2016, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNOSAT\\_A3\\_Aleppo\\_DamagePercentage\\_20160918opt.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNOSAT_A3_Aleppo_DamagePercentage_20160918opt.pdf).



# Hospital Attacks



A damaged operation room is pictured after an airstrike on the rebel-held town of Atareb in the countryside west of Aleppo, Syria November 15, 2016. Source: Reuters/Ammar Abdullah

Throughout the final months of 2016, dozens of attacks on hospitals and clinics in opposition-controlled parts of Aleppo were reported. Doctors and nurses, whose chief task during the siege was to care for the victims of bombings and shellings, all too often fell victim to bombs themselves.

As many as 172 verified attacks on medical facilities and personnel were reported across Syria between June and December 2016.<sup>101</sup> According to figures from the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), seventy-three of those (42 percent) occurred in the city of Aleppo. The attacks were so frequent, and some key hospitals were struck so many times, that the incidents appear to constitute a systematic attempt to destroy the city's medical support.

These attacks against medical facilities reflected a pattern seen across the country, and documented by groups such as the World Health

Organization,<sup>102</sup> Amnesty International,<sup>103</sup> and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).<sup>104</sup> Physicians for Human Rights documented 400 attacks on 276 medical facilities, with the deaths of 768 medical personnel, between the beginning of the conflict and the end of July 2016; by their count, 362 of the attacks and 713 of the deaths can be attributed to the Syrian government and allied forces.<sup>105</sup>

Using the masses of information available about these attacks, it is possible to examine their number and scale in Aleppo, the anatomy of individual attacks, and the impact of multiple attacks on individual facilities.

101 "The Failure of UN Security Council Resolution 2286 in Preventing Attacks On Healthcare in Syria," Syrian American Medical Society, January 11, 2017, <https://foundation.sams-usa.net/reports/failure-un-security-council-resolution-2286-preventing-attacks-healthcare-syria/>.

102 "WHO condemns massive attacks on five hospitals in Syria," World Health Organization, November 16, 2016, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2016/attacks-hospitals-syria/en/>.

103 "Syria: Fatal airstrike on maternity hospital a potential war crime," Amnesty International, July 29, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/07/syria-fatal-airstrike-on-maternity-hospital-a-potential-war-crime/>.

104 "Syria: MSF-supported hospital in Idlib destroyed amid increasing attacks," Médecins Sans Frontières, December 8, 2016, <https://www.msf.org.uk/article/syria-msf-supported-hospital-idlib-destroyed-amid-increasing-attacks>.

105 "Anatomy of a Crisis: A Map of Attacks on Health Care in Syria," Physicians for Human Rights, July 2016, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR\\_syria\\_map/findings.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_syria_map/findings.pdf).

## Fourth Geneva Convention, Articles 18 and 19.

Art. 18. Civilian hospitals organized to give care to the wounded and sick, the infirm and maternity cases, may in no circumstances be the object of attack but shall at all times be respected and protected by the Parties to the conflict.(...)

Art. 19. The protection to which civilian hospitals are entitled shall not cease unless they are used to commit, outside their humanitarian duties, acts harmful to the enemy. Protection may, however, cease only after due warning has been given, naming, in all appropriate cases, a reasonable time limit and after such warning has remained unheeded.

The fact that sick or wounded members of the armed forces are nursed in these hospitals, or the presence of small arms and ammunition taken from such combatants and not yet been handed to the proper service, shall not be considered to be acts harmful to the enemy. civilized peoples.<sup>106</sup>

### A pattern of attacks

Human rights organizations and other NGOs have attempted to record the number of attacks against medical facilities across Syria. Their calculations, made independently and across different time frames, reveal a staggering level of violence against medical facilities: an average of more than one attack a week, every week, since the conflict began.

Between 2011 and July 2016, Physicians for Human Rights mapped 400 attacks across Syria, the vast majority being by Russian and Syrian government forces.<sup>107</sup> This translates into roughly one hospital strike every four and a half days. A Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) report identified over seventy attacks by pro-government forces on medical facilities in Aleppo city between June and December 2016, an average of one attack every three days.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> The Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, pp.153-221.

<sup>107</sup> "A Map of Attacks on Health Care in Syria," Physicians for Human Rights, October 16, 2016, <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/multimedia/a-map-of-attacks-on-health-care-in-syria.html>.

<sup>108</sup> "The Failure of UN Security Council Resolution 2286 in Preventing Attacks on Healthcare in Syria."

The Russian government "categorically" rejected allegations of hospital bombings by Russian forces; Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated, "those who make such statements are not capable of backing them up with proof."<sup>109</sup>

Syria's President Assad, meanwhile, is on the record as saying that deliberately bombing hospitals would constitute a war crime.<sup>110</sup> When challenged with the claim that hospitals in Aleppo were being bombed, he retorted: "We don't attack any hospital. We don't have any interest in attacking hospitals."<sup>111</sup> Assad continued: "As a government, we don't have a policy to destroy hospitals or schools or any such facility."<sup>112</sup>

These statements offer, in essence, two defenses. Peskov argued that there was no proof of hospital strikes; Assad, that there was no policy.

The proof, however, exists in many forms, including witness testimonies, news footage, videos shot from security cameras and by rescuers, and photographs. Taken together and verified, these form a compelling body of evidence to suggest that the Assad government and its allies, including Russia, did indeed have a policy of targeting Syria's hospitals.

### Hospital attacks in Aleppo

According to the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), 172 verified attacks on hospitals or medical facilities were recorded across Syria between June and December 2016. Of those, 73 verified attacks—42 percent of the total—were recorded in the besieged, opposition-held half of Aleppo. According to the report, the strikes used a wide range of weapons, including air-to-surface missiles, cluster munitions, barrel bombs and incendiaries.

This data set can be cross-referenced against other open source information to understand what really happened to Aleppo's hospitals.

<sup>109</sup> "Russia Rejects Syria War Crimes Claim over Hospital Attacks," BBC News, February 16, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35586886>.

<sup>110</sup> "President al-Assad to Denmark's TV 2: Moderate Opposition is a Myth... We Won't Accept that Terrorists will Take Control of any Part of Syria-Video," SANA, October 6, 2016, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=89763>.

<sup>111</sup> "Full Transcript of AP Interview with Syrian President Assad," Associated Press, September 22, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/c6cfec4970e44283968baa98c41716bd/full-transcript-ap-interview-syrian-president-assad>.

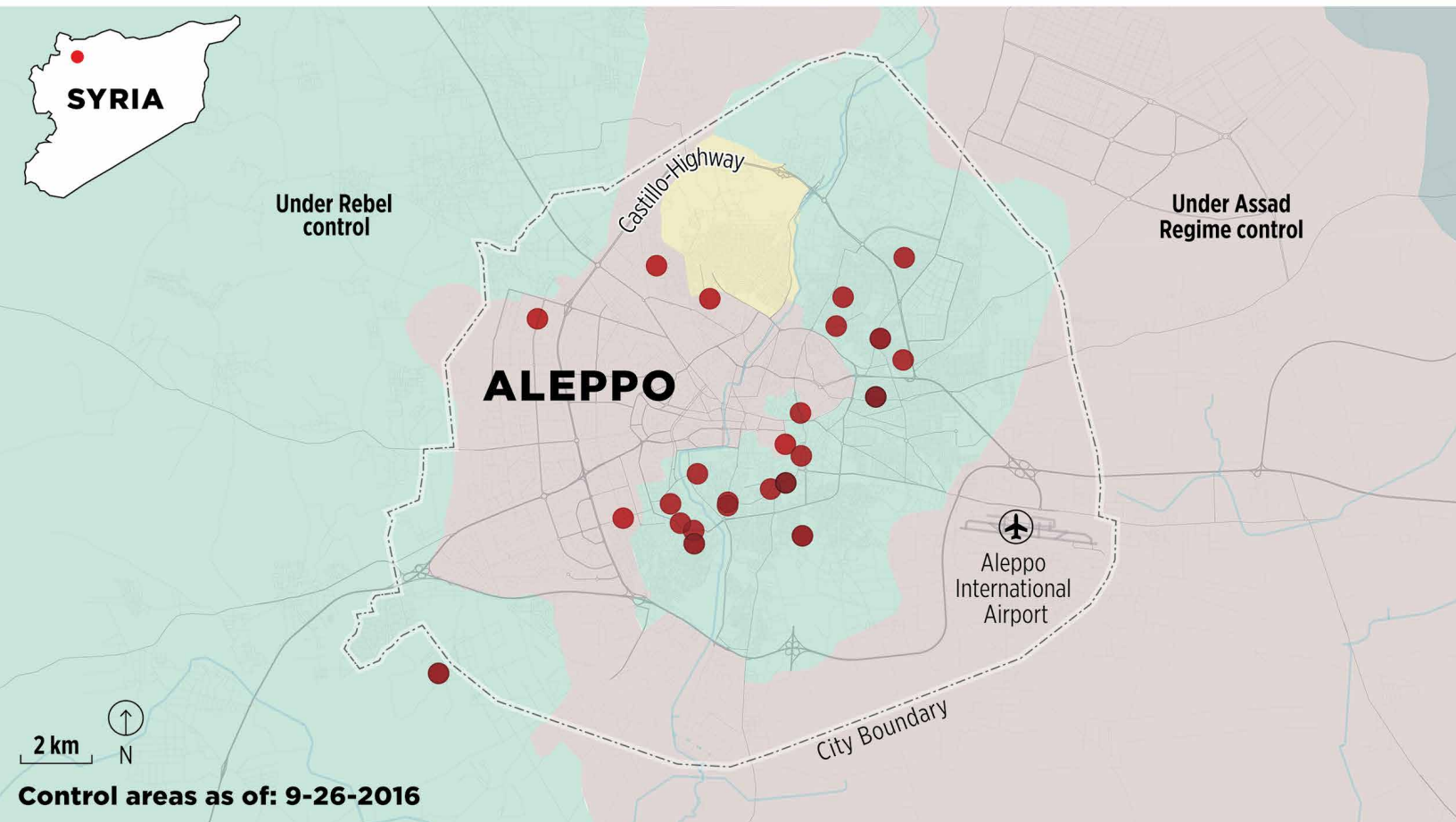
<sup>112</sup> "'Bombing Hospitals is a War Crime,' Syria's Assad Says," ITV News, October 6, 2016, <http://www.itv.com/news/2016-10-06/striking-hospitals-is-a-war-crime-syrias-assad-says/>.

## Air Strikes on Hospitals in and around Aleppo

Attacks between June 3rd and December 14th 2016

● Attack on Hospital ● More than one Attack

■ Assad Regime ■ Rebels ■ YPG (Kurds) ■ ISIS



info.BILD.de | Source: Atlantic Council, IHS, OSM

According to UN operational plans, in mid-August there were nine “hospitals” and fifteen clinics in east Aleppo. Of these, ten had no doctors or were closed. Of nine SAMS-supported facilities and clinics in Aleppo city, only three offered trauma or intensive care facilities—the hospitals known as M1, M2, and M10. Only one of these clinics, M2, also had a pediatric facility. Some of the clinics were “staffed only by nurses (providing first aid) or midwives.”

As there were only a limited number of medical facilities in east Aleppo, the seventy-three verified attacks often hit the same hospitals repeatedly. This led to a situation where medical facilities were temporarily disabled while repairs took place and staff and equipment were replaced, leading to confusion and the spread of false information

about the situation at the hospitals.<sup>113</sup>

For example, the SAMS-supported M2 hospital in al-Maadi district was reportedly damaged in at least twelve attacks between June and December 2016. By examining open source videos and images, as well as satellite images of the area around the hospital, it is possible to confirm that many of those attacks occurred. Damage to structures around the hospital is consistent with attacks from above and would strongly indicate the use of air-dropped bombs and artillery, in line with reports from the hospital.

<sup>113</sup>“Last Hospital in Aleppo,” DFR Lab, January 16, 2017, <https://medium.com/@DFRLab/last-hospital-in-aleppo-e1ede0486c06>.

## Breaking Aleppo



Above: The moment of impact on June 14, 2016 caught on M2 hospital's CCTV (Source—M2 Hospital/Facebook)



Below: Interior damage to M2 Hospital after the June 14 attack (Source—Syria Tiger/YouTube)

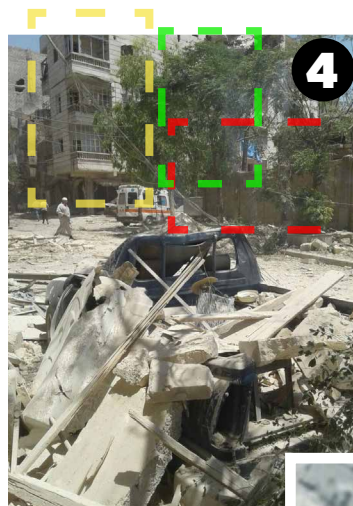


Interior damage to M2 Hospital after the June 14 attack (Source—SAMS USA/Twitter)

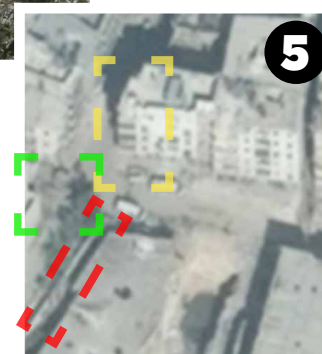
On June 14, the hospital reported it had been hit by an aerial attack, with the moment of the attack being caught **(1)** by the hospital's CCTV system.<sup>114 115</sup>

Video footage and photographs from inside the hospital **(2 and 3)** showed structural damage to the building and damage to equipment.<sup>116 117</sup>

More attacks followed. One strike was reported on July 14; on July 16, another attack was reported, again with CCTV footage showing the moment of the attack from multiple angles. In this incident, photographs and videos from the attack allowed locations in the photographs to be firmly identified, allowing analysts to confirm that the locations featured were indeed M2 Hospital. To begin this process, a photograph taken outside the hospital after the attack, showing debris and damaged vehicles, was geolocated **(4 and 5)**<sup>118</sup>:



Geolocation of exterior damage at M2 Hospital, July 16 2016. Yellow box—Matching balcony; Red box—Matching wall and building; Green box—Matching tree positions (Source—Left, SAM USA/Twitter; Below, DigitalGlobe NextView License)



<sup>114</sup>M2 Hospital's Facebook post, June 20, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/640360569329382/videos/1171442476221186/>; M2 Hospital's Facebook post, June 23, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/640360569329382/videos/1174075815957852>.

<sup>115</sup> M2 Hospital's Facebook post, June 23, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/640360569329382/videos/1174075815957852>.

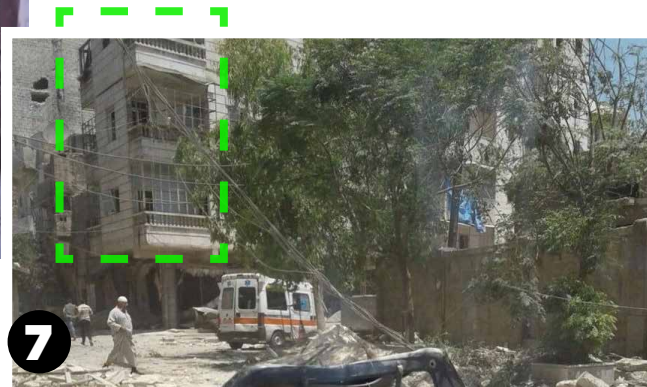
<sup>116</sup> ناري طلا لبقق نم هفادهتس اارج قمدخلال نع زيزعلا دبغ نب رمع يفشم جورخ" YouTube, uploaded by "يوسال رمن," June 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzKib-zyLsM>.

<sup>117</sup> Syrian American Medical Society Foundation, post on Twitter, June 14, 2016, [https://twitter.com/sams\\_usa/status/742800881444376576](https://twitter.com/sams_usa/status/742800881444376576).

<sup>118</sup> Syrian American Medical Society Foundation, post on Twitter, July 16, 2016, [https://twitter.com/sams\\_usa/status/754365987638484994](https://twitter.com/sams_usa/status/754365987638484994).



Comparison of AMC footage (left) to the geolocated exterior photograph below) (Sources—SAMS USA/Twitter, AMC/YouTube)



A video published by the Aleppo Media Center (AMC) showed the aftermath of the attack,<sup>119</sup> with patients being evacuated to another medical center. During the video, a sequence (6) showed one patient being transported through the building into an ambulance waiting outside the building. It was possible to match the balcony visible in the geolocated photograph (7) to a balcony in the background of the exterior shot in the Aleppo Media Center video.



By following the journey of the patient in the AMC video (8) back to its starting point inside the hospital building, it was then possible to match the route to CCTV footage (9) showing the moment of the attack, also posted on YouTube by AMC.<sup>120</sup>



This CCTV footage (10), from the same cameras that captured the June 24 bombing, clearly shows that the building was damaged on July 16; parts of the video show the explosion throwing debris through the air with civilians, staff, and patients caught in the attack. The images show the moment a civilian is hit by a large piece of material flung through the air by the explosive force of the attack.<sup>121</sup>

Comparison of AMC footage during the bombing and after the bombing. (Source—AMC/YouTube)

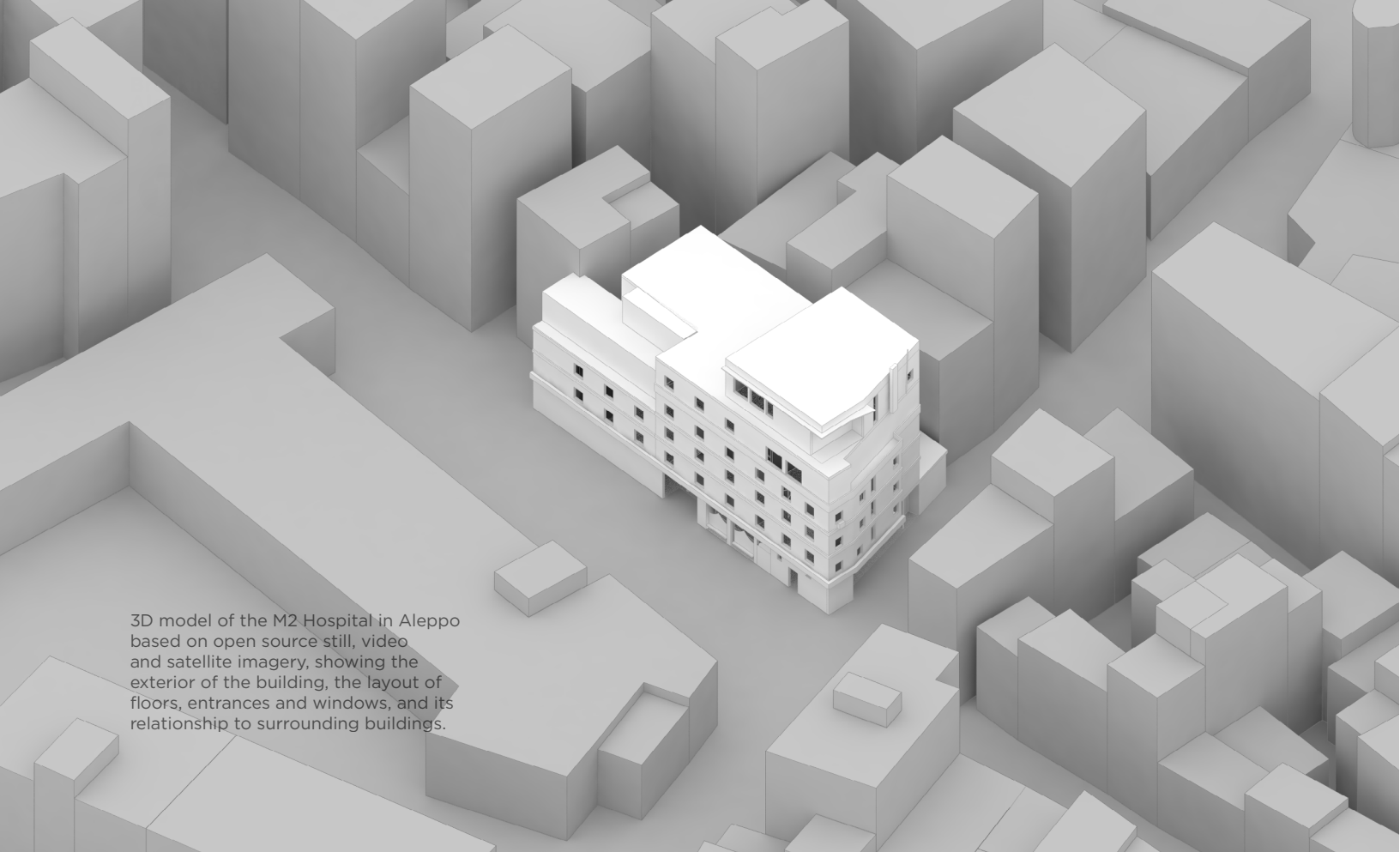


The moment a civilian is struck by debris during the July 16 attack (Source—AMC/YouTube)

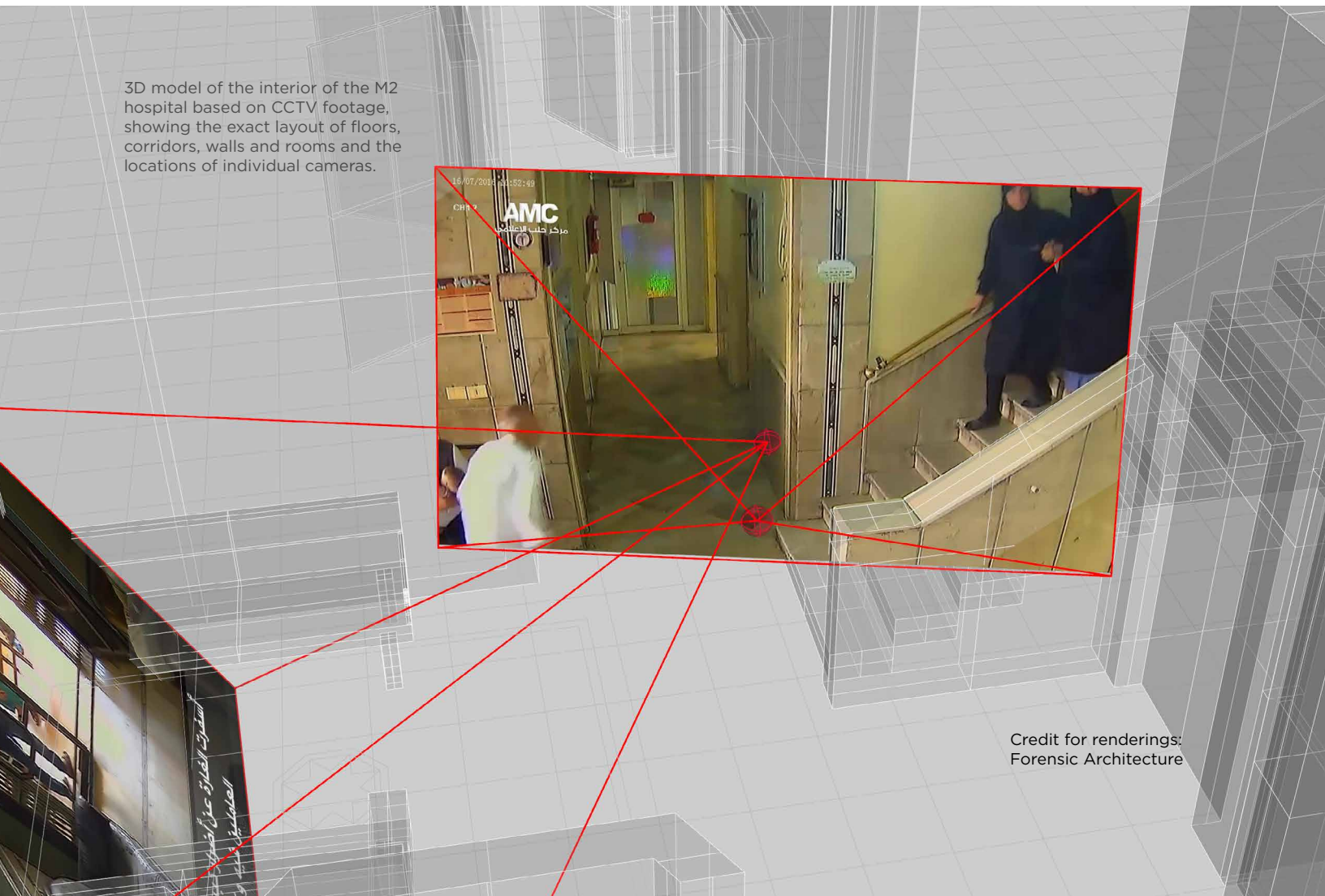
119 زي زعل ادبع نب رمع يفشم تب قحج لة يدام رارض او يبطل ا ردالك ا يف تاب اص ا 16-7-2016,” YouTube, uploaded by Aleppo Media Center, July 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TRyflOpY4Q>.

120 ادبع نب رمع يفشم فدهتسا يذلا يوجال فصقل” اميرجال قثوت تاظحل” ” زومت رهش فصتنم زي زعل ا” YouTube, uploaded by Aleppo Media Center, July 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBfCb4OGodI>.

121 ادبع نب رمع يفشم فدهتسا يذلا يوجال فصقل” اميرجال قثوت تاظحل” ” زومت رهش فصتنم زي زعل ا” YouTube, uploaded by Aleppo Media Center, July 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBfCb4OGodI>.



3D model of the M2 Hospital in Aleppo based on open source still, video and satellite imagery, showing the exterior of the building, the layout of floors, entrances and windows, and its relationship to surrounding buildings.



3D model of the interior of the M2 hospital based on CCTV footage, showing the exact layout of floors, corridors, walls and rooms and the locations of individual cameras.

Credit for renderings:  
Forensic Architecture



An ambulance marked “Walthamstow 2 Syria” lightly damaged in the July 14 2016 attack (Source—SAMS) The “Walthamstow 2 Syria” ambulance photographed after the August 3 2016 attack (Source—SAMS)

Footage published online from the July 16 attack included many more CCTV camera videos than the June attack,<sup>122</sup> as well as footage filmed by local activists showing different areas of the hospital and confirming that the building was damaged on several floors. Reports from the Syrian American Medical Society, who were supporting the hospital at the time, stated that six medical staff were injured, along with seven patients and civilians in and around the hospital.

Elsewhere, photographs from the August attacks showed further damage to the hospital building and the destruction of an ambulance used by the hospital that was featured in earlier photographs. **(11 and 12)**

September 28 brought familiar scenes as CCTV cameras, their locations and angles now mapped out by examining footage of previous attacks, yet again caught the moment of an attack in footage broadcast on Britain’s Channel 4 News:<sup>123</sup> Reports from SAMS stated that this attack resulted in significant damage to the hospital, damaging its generators and fuel tanks, as well as killing five people and injuring twenty civilians, staff, and patients.

Taken together, these images from multiple sources over a period of several months confirm that the M2 hospital was repeatedly struck between June and December 2016. Multiple vehicles used by the hospital were damaged and destroyed, equipment in the hospital was damaged and destroyed, and the attacks, while not destroying the hospital, severely reduced its ability to serve the local population.

122 Ibid.

123 “Inside Aleppo: Hospitals Bombed,” YouTube, uploaded by Channel 4 News, September 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXs0dIxWmnU>.



Russian Ministry of Defense Satellite Imagery of al-Sakhour hospital (Source—YouTube/Russian Ministry of Defense)



Al Sakhour Hospital, Aleppo, view south, after the October 3 bombing (Source—Yasser Alhaji)

### Denial

As public awareness of the plight of Aleppo’s hospitals grew, so did official denials. Between September 28 and October 3, 2016, the SAMS-supported al-Sakhur hospital (also known as the M10 hospital), was hit in three separate incidents, damaging the hospital buildings and killing staff and patients.<sup>124</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) gave a press conference **(1)**<sup>125</sup> that included a denial that attacks on the facility had taken place.<sup>126</sup> The MoD briefer, Lieutenant-General Sergei Rudskoy, presented satellite imagery, which he claimed was taken between September 24 and October 11, stating “no changes to the facility can be observed” and that “this fact proves that all accusations of indiscriminate strikes voiced by some alleged eyewitnesses turn out to be mere fakes.”

However, open source images and satellite imagery proved that this was not the case, and the Russian MoD’s imagery was deceptive.<sup>127</sup> Due to the frequency of the attacks in that one-week period, photographs and videos taken by local media and activists are available showing different levels of

damage to the hospital area after each attack. For example, a massive crater **(2)** in the road just east of the hospital appeared after the October 3 bombing, as well as previously unseen damage to the east side of the building.

This crater and the damage to the hospital building are also clearly visible in satellite imagery of the area taken on September 25 and October 13.



Damage to al-Sakhour Hospital—Left, September 25; Below, October 13 (Source—Digital Globe/NextView)



124 “Syria’s War: Aleppo Hospital Bombed Again,” Al Jazeera, October 2, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/syria-war-aleppo-hospital-bombed-time-161001135413643.html>.

125 “Брифинг НГ’ОУ ГШ ВС РФ генерал-лейтенанта С.Ф. Рудского (25.10.2016),” YouTube video, 8:05, October 25, 2016, posted by “Минобороны России,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BGQeYf2t6w&feature=youtu.be&t=295>.

126 “Russia Ready to Deliver Strikes on Militants into Syria from Iraq - General,” TASS, October 25, 2016, <http://tass.com/defense/908612>.

127 Elliot Higgins, “Fact-Checking Russia’s Claim that It Didn’t Bomb Another Hospital in Syria,” Bellingcat, November 9, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/09/fact-checking-russias-claim-didnt-bomb-another-hospital-syria/>.

CCTV cameras at the hospital also recorded the moment of impact, **(4)** showing damage inside and outside of the hospital buildings, with footage verified against other imagery of the hospital shared after previous attacks.<sup>128</sup>

128 “October 3rd - Al-Sakhour/M10 hospital camera 1,” YouTube video, 9:49, October 28, 2016, posted by “bellingcat,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEPd3xY5ynU>.





M10 hospital courtyard CCTV footage before and after the bombing of October 3, 2016  
(Source—Yasser Alhaji/Bellingcat)

The Russian MoD's satellite images of the same location were taken between September 24 and October 11, very close to the dates of the above images, yet they claim no damage is visible. On commercially available imagery, the damage is clearly visible. It is unclear whether the error stems from a Russian satellite, a Russian analyst, or the Russian MoD's spokesman; what is clear is that Rudskoy's claim that "no changes to the facility can be observed" was false.

This misinterpretation of satellite and aerial imagery by the Russian MoD has been a frequent occurrence, both in the conflict in Syria and previously, in response to the downing of flight MH17 in Ukraine.<sup>129</sup> It is fair to say that the MoD's use of such imagery has revealed so many inaccuracies that it should be considered unreliable unless supported by corroborating independent evidence.

### **Targeting hospitals: a deliberate strategy?**

The evidence that many hospitals were hit, and that individual hospitals were hit repeatedly, is extremely strong. Nonetheless, throughout the conflict, the response from the Syrian and Russian governments was to deny any and all accusations of deliberately targeting hospitals.

Lacking direct documentary or eyewitness evidence of orders given by the government and its allies to target hospitals, those denials are difficult to disprove. However, several strands of circumstantial evidence point toward hospital strikes as a deliberate policy.

The first circumstantial thread is the sheer volume of strikes on medical facilities recorded during the conflict: over 400 across Syria, according to Physicians for Human Rights; over 70 in Aleppo in the second half of 2016, according to SAMS. It

is very unlikely that such a high rate of strikes on facilities covered under the Geneva Convention was accidental.

Second is the Assad government's intimate knowledge of the terrain. It has ruled the country for decades; most, if not all, of the hospitals destroyed were built under its aegis. It would therefore be illogical to argue that the government and its allies did not know where the hospitals were. They did know; but somehow, they failed to protect them, not once or twice, but hundreds of times. At best, this is a systemic failure of the duty to protect medical facilities; at worst, it suggests a deliberate policy of targeting hospitals.

A third indicator is the repeated confiscation by pro-government forces of medical supplies from humanitarian aid convoys to opposition-controlled areas across Syria. While trauma and surgical equipment was most frequently removed, antibiotics, anesthetic and antibacterial medicines, obstetric kits for midwives, burn kits, and other medicines were all extracted. In one convoy to besieged al-Waer in 2016, 5.3 tons of medical aid was removed from a convoy, allowing only 440 kg to get through.<sup>130</sup> This apparent attempt to deprive doctors and hospitals in areas under opposition control of medicines and supplies suggests a consistent strategy, implemented whenever and however possible.

The final indicator is the strategic context of the strikes, and their application in the broader pattern of siege warfare. The bombing of Darayya's last hospital on August 18, 2016,<sup>131</sup> precipitated the agreement of the community to accept an

<sup>129</sup> "Lie in the Sky," DFR Lab, November 12, 2016, <https://medium.com/@DFRLab/lie-in-the-sky-224186b6e98c#iv9z2780j>.

<sup>130</sup> Beals and Hopkins, "Lifesaving UN Aid Regularly Fails to Reach Besieged Syrians."

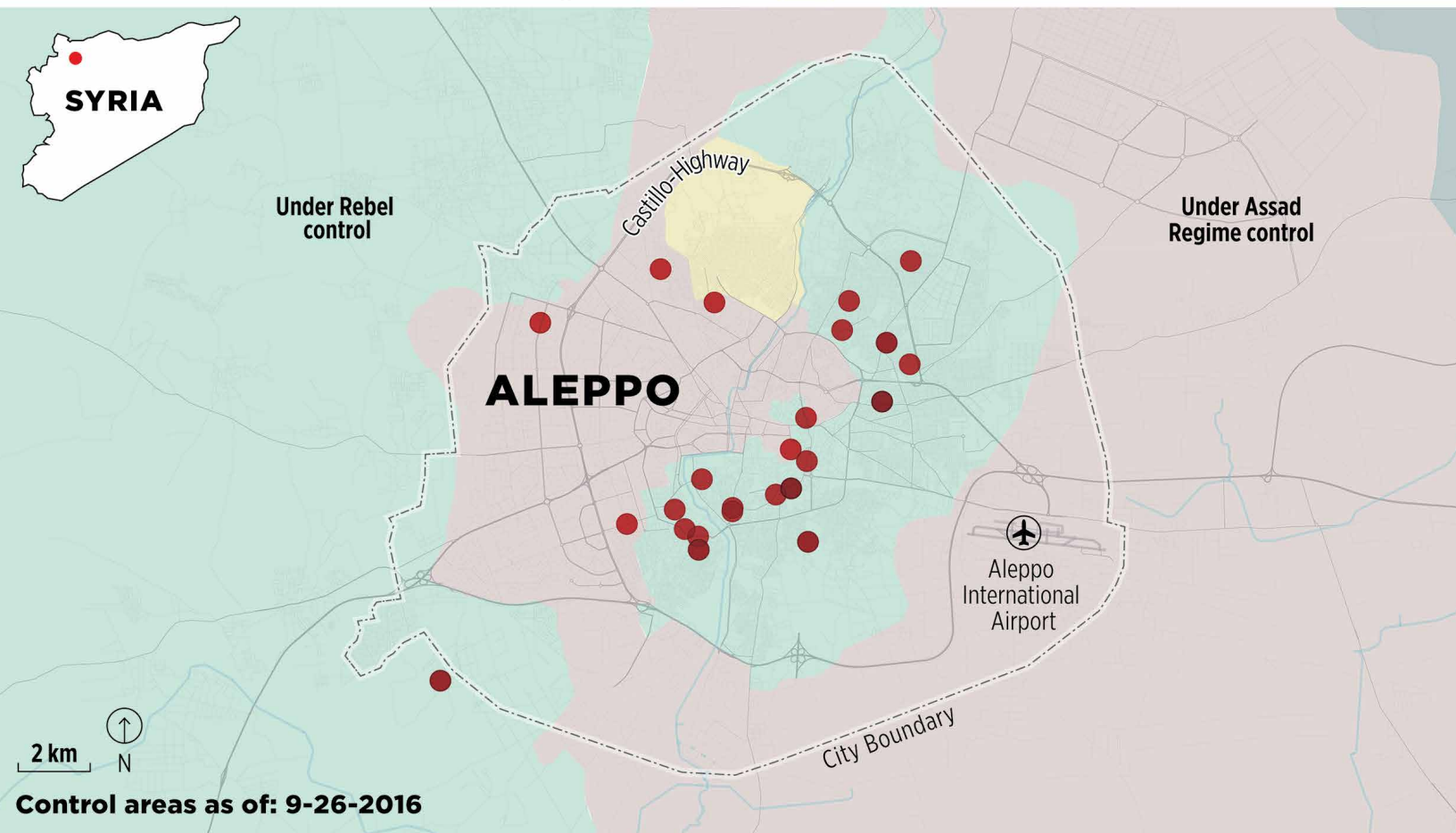
<sup>131</sup> "Syria's Civil War: 'Last Hospital in Daraya Bombed,'" Al Jazeera, August 19, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/syria-civil-war-daraya-hospital-bombed-160819101838839.html>.

## Air Strikes on Hospitals in and around Aleppo

Attacks between June 3rd and December 14th 2016

● Attack on Hospital ● More than one Attack

■ Assad Regime ■ Rebels ■ YPG (Kurds) ■ ISIS



info.BILD.de | Source: Atlantic Council, IHS, OSM

evacuation deal.<sup>132</sup> Darayya had endured four years of siege; the loss of the hospital was a decisive factor in the civilian population's decision to vacate the area.

Taken together, this evidence strongly suggests that the Assad government and its allies targeted hospitals deliberately, as part of a strategy intended to break the will and infrastructure of the resistance.

132 "Syria Darayya: Evacuation of Siege Town Begins," BBC News, August 26, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37197933>.

A photograph showing a man in a dark uniform and a headscarf looking towards a large fire burning in the distance. The fire is bright orange and yellow, with thick smoke rising. The scene is set in a dark, possibly urban environment with some stone structures visible in the foreground.

# Incendiary Weapons

A Free Syrian Army fighter inspects a fire that activists said was started by an incendiary bullet fired by forces loyal to Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad in Deir al-Zor, eastern Syria February 15, 2014. Picture taken February 15, 2014. Source: Reuters/Khalil Ashawi

“Assad or we burn the country” was a popular pro-government slogan, scrawled on the walls by government-aligned *shabeeha* militia in the early days of the uprising,<sup>133</sup> but it came to refer, colloquially at least, to the “scorched earth” strategy used by the government’s forces. Footage of Old Homs, evacuated in May 2014, showed an early indication of the lengths and levels of destruction to which the regime would go when attempting to regain control of an area.<sup>134</sup>

133 Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, “‘Either Assad or We’ll Burn the Country’ - An Excerpt from ‘Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War,’” *Mondoweiss*, May 11, 2016, <http://mondoweiss.net/2016/05/excerpt-syrians-revolution>.

134 Miriam Berger, “Harrowing Images from The Evacuation Of Syria’s Destroyed City Of Homs,” *BuzzFeed*, May 7, 2014, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/miriamberger/harrowing-images-from-the-evacuation-of-syrias-destroyed-cit?utm\\_term=.xnkr7yOZ#.asakM4eD](https://www.buzzfeed.com/miriamberger/harrowing-images-from-the-evacuation-of-syrias-destroyed-cit?utm_term=.xnkr7yOZ#.asakM4eD).

Incendiary attacks had long been reported from the countryside outside Aleppo city: HRW recorded over sixty attacks between November 2012 and the end of 2015.<sup>135</sup> The use of fire as a weapon increased after Russian forces entered the conflict in 2015. In the second half of 2016, however, over a dozen attacks were reported in the city itself. Aleppo burned, literally as well as figuratively.

Using open source investigative techniques, it is possible to examine the mounting evidence of the use of incendiary weapons as reported by activists and journalists, and as documented by human rights advocates.

135 “From Condemnation to Concrete Action: A Five-Year Review of Incendiary Weapons,” HRW, November 2015, <http://hrp.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Incendiaries-5-year-review-final.pdf>.

## What are Incendiary Weapons?

Incendiary weapons are designed to burn or set fires. They have a number of military uses, such as anti-personnel strikes or destroying sensitive equipment. A fundamentally indiscriminate weapon, they can cause intensely painful burns to anyone caught in their path, soldiers, and civilians alike. The incendiary material is designed to penetrate plate metal, and can thus go far beyond destroying human skin.<sup>136</sup> Though often referred to as bombs, they are in fact not explosives, as they use ignition instead of detonation to start and maintain the fire.

The most common ingredient of modern incendiary weapons is thermite, which is composed of aluminum and ferric oxide. This substance takes a very high temperature to ignite, but can then burn through steel. Another common incendiary is white phosphorus; primarily designed to create smoke, it can cause agonizing burns to people caught by it, and to those treating them.<sup>137</sup> Between 1980 and 2016, incendiary weapons were used or reportedly used in at least seventeen different conflicts. In 2016 alone, the United States used white phosphorus munitions in Iraq, while the Saudi Arabia-led coalition used these weapons in Yemen.<sup>138</sup> However, according to HRW, by far the most prolific use of incendiary weapons in 2016 was by the Assad government and its Russian ally in Syria.

The use of incendiary weapons, in itself, is not illegal. However, the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCWC), concluded in 1980, lists prohibitions or restrictions on the use of certain conventional weapons that may be deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects.<sup>139</sup> Protocol III regulates the use of incendiary weapons; Article 2 of that protocol bans the use of any incendiary weapons on civilian objects, and the use of air-dropped incendiary weapons on military objects in residential areas. Russia is a party to the Convention, while Syria is not.<sup>140</sup>

136 For more information on the harm incendiary weapons can cause to civilians, see Human Rights Watch and Harvard Law School International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC), *The Human Suffering Caused by Incendiary Munitions: Memorandum to Convention on Conventional Weapons Delegates*, March 2011, <http://hrp.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/sufferingweapons.pdf>.

137 "White Phosphorus (WP)," *Global Security*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/munitions/wp.htm>.

138 Human Rights Watch report "Time to Act against Incendiary Weapons," <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/12/time-act-against-incendiary-weapons>, 1.

139 "United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons," *United Nations*, [http://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl\\_conv/conventions/pdf/conweapons.pdf](http://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pdf/conweapons.pdf).

140 "State Parties and Signatories," *The United Nations Office at Geneva*, June 21, 2016, [http://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/\(httpPages\)/3CE7CFC0AA4A7548C12571C00039CBOC?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/(httpPages)/3CE7CFC0AA4A7548C12571C00039CBOC?OpenDocument).

“  
**Assad or  
we burn the  
country.”**

## Increase in the Use of Incendiary Weapons in Syria

The use of incendiaries in Aleppo mirrors a broader pattern of use elsewhere in Syria: 2016 saw a dramatic increase in their use across the country. Human Rights Watch has conducted extensive work on this subject.<sup>141</sup> On December 12, 2016, the group released a report documenting civilian suffering from incendiary weapons used in Syria since 2012,<sup>142</sup> focusing on their increased use during the preceding year's joint operations by Syrian government and Russian forces.

Between June 5 and August 10, 2016, HRW reported that incendiary weapons were used at least eighteen times on targets in the opposition-held areas of Aleppo and Idlib provinces;<sup>143</sup> no fewer than nine incidents above opposition-held east Aleppo were reported in September. In the words of HRW's report, "For at least a few weeks in mid-2016, incendiary weapons were used almost every day in attacks on opposition-held areas."<sup>144</sup>

As with hospital strikes, reports of incendiary strikes have been vigorously denied. In late 2015, Major-General Igor Konashenkov, the spokesperson of the Russian MoD, explicitly denied the use of incendiary weapons and accused Amnesty International of "fakes" and "clichés" in a report alleging their use.<sup>145</sup>

However, Kremlin TV station RT (formerly Russia Today) published a striking piece of evidence on June 18, 2016, from Hmeimim, a primarily Russian air base southeast of the city of Latakia. Footage

141 Mary Wareham, "Incendiary Bombs are Killing Kids in Syria," *Human Rights Watch*, November 11, 2013,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/11/incendiary-bombs-are-killing-kids-syria>.

142 *Time to Act against Incendiary Weapons*, 16.

143 *Ibid.*

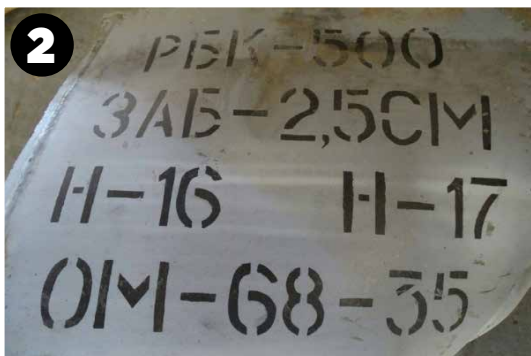
144 *Ibid.*

145 'Amnesty Int'l Report on 'Civilian Deaths' Based on Fakes, Cliches,' *Sputnik News*, December 23, 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201512231032213565-amnesty-intl-report-fake/>.



Image from RT video identifying cluster munition and incendiary cluster munition mounted on Russian attack aircraft (Source—RT/YouTube)

A weapon remnant published by the White Helmets after a reported incendiary cluster weapon attack in the Homs Governorate. The inscription in Cyrillic says it is part of a RBK-500 ZAB-2,5SM incendiary cluster weapon. Source: White Helmets in Homs.



of the Russian defense minister visiting the base also showed RBK-500 ZAB-2.5S/M incendiary cluster weapons being mounted on a Russian Su-34, a fighter ground attack aircraft operated only by Russia in Syria.<sup>146</sup> Each such weapon contains 117 ZAB-2.5SM incendiary submunitions. The specific part of the video (1) showing the incendiary cluster weapons was later cut out of a version of the video report uploaded to YouTube by RT.<sup>147</sup>

As with the hospital strikes, some of the reported incendiary attacks have been documented in detail and can be independently verified. One such attack occurred between the towns of Rastan and Talbiseh in Homs province on the night from October 1 to October 2, 2016. Local pro-opposition media uploaded a video to their Facebook page that purportedly showed the moment of impact of the incendiary weapon.<sup>148</sup>

In the days following the incident, the Syrian Civil Defense—the White Helmets—published photos (2) on their Facebook page claiming to show

weapon fragments.<sup>149</sup> <sup>150</sup> Using reference photos and inscriptions on those remnants, the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), a group of Russian digital forensic researchers, positively identified the weapon as a RBK-500 ZAB-2.5S/M incendiary cluster bomb.<sup>151</sup>

The Cyrillic inscriptions on the casing read “RBK 500 ZAB-2.5S/M.” ‘ZAB’ is an abbreviation of the Russian *Зажигательная Авиационная Бомба* (“incendiary aviation bomb”).

The weapon remnants resembled reference photos of the cluster and submunitions available from open sources. A large remnant strongly resembled the “lid” (nose part) and cylindrical casing of an RBK-500 series cluster bomb, and the smaller remnants were identified as two different types of incendiary submunitions: the ZAB-2.5S and the ZAB-2,5(M). These specific types of weapons were not documented prior to Russia’s intervention in Syria, leading CIT to conclude that the airstrike was likely conducted by the Russian Air Force. CIT was not able to establish whether the buildings targeted had been inhabited: if they had, the group argued, the attack would have been illegal under

146 RT’s YouTube video, June 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNbIRD8Cq48&feature=youtu.be&t=44>; Ruslan Leviev, “Sputnik, RT and Russian MoD Expose Cluster Bombs at Hmeymim Airbase,” Conflict Intelligence Team, June 7, 2016, <https://citeam.org/sputnik-rt-and-russian-mod-expose-cluster-bombs-at-hmeimim-airbase>.

147 Lizzie Dearden, “Russia-Backed Broadcaster RT Cuts Footage Proving Use of Incendiary ‘Cluster Bombs’ in Syria,” Independent, June 21, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-today-syria-war-cluster-bomb-footage-censorship-video-vladimir-putin-a7093141.html>.

148 “Motasem homs”’s YouTube video. October 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PL3vE7Lp4BcaFpsYlpO92RwSolj83BnFlq&v=MZY7UvrnxUw>.

149 “Syrian civil defence in Homs”’s Facebook post, October 2, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/SCD.HOMS/posts/603882693122910>.

150 “Syrian civil defence in Homs,” Facebook post, October 2, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/SCD.HOMS/posts/603882693122910>.

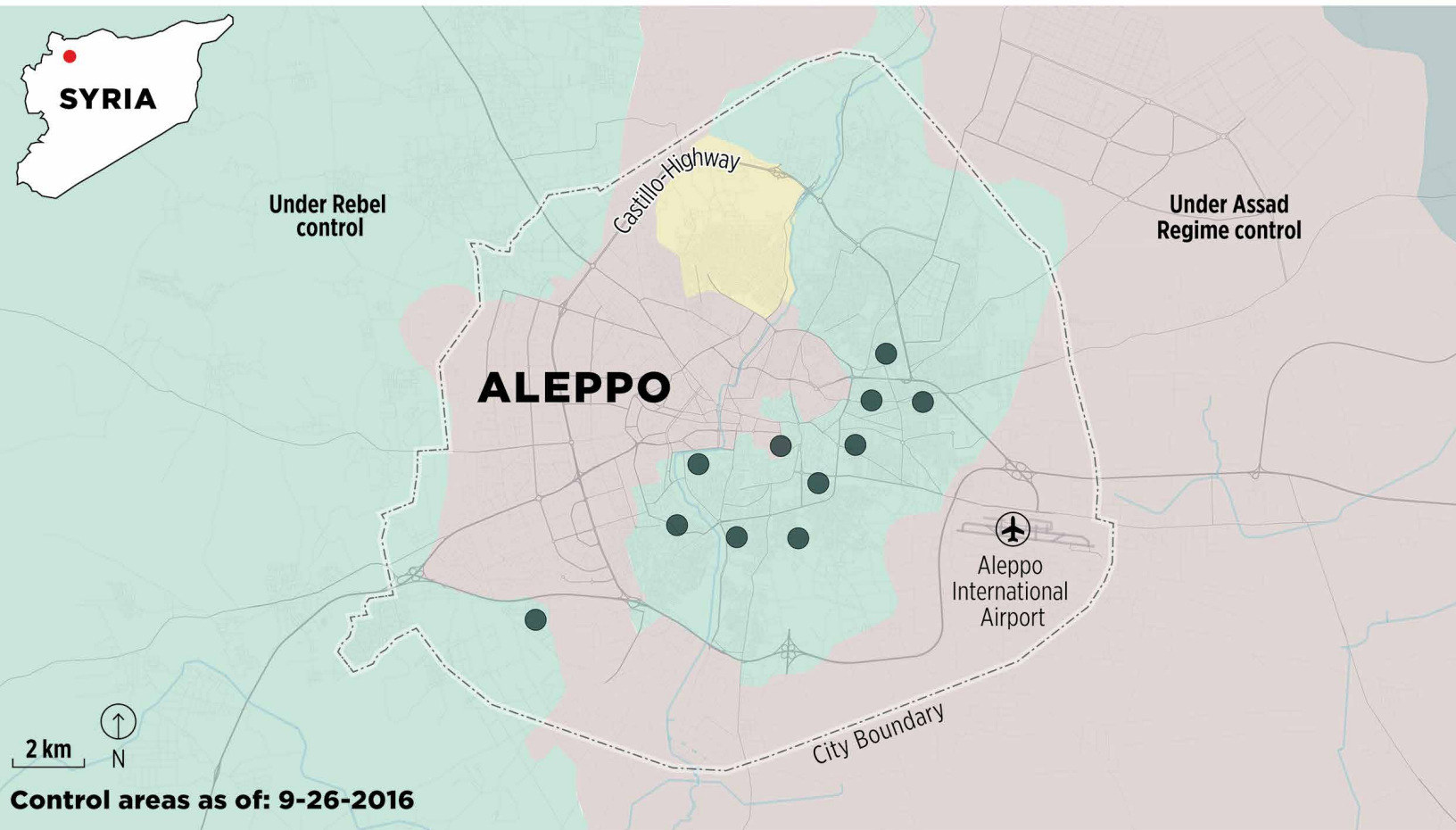
151 ‘New Evidence of Russian Incendiary Bombs Use in Syria,’ Conflict Intelligence Team, <https://citeam.org/new-evidence-of-russian-incendiary-bomb-use-in-syria/>.

# Use of Incendiary Ammunition in and around Aleppo

Attacks between August 7th and October 14th 2016

● Incendiary Weapon Attack

Assad Regime   Rebels   YPG (Kurds)   ISIS



info.BILD.de | Source: Atlantic Council, IHS, OSM

the convention.<sup>152</sup> Besides the RBK-500 ZAB-2.5SM incendiary cluster weapons, HRW has recorded the use of three other types of air-dropped incendiary weapons, all part of the Soviet-produced ZAB series: RBK-250 ZAB-2.5 cluster bombs, each containing 48 ZAB-2.5 incendiary submunitions; ZAB-100-105 cluster bombs, each containing 48 ZAB-2.5 incendiary submunitions; and ZAB-500 unitary incendiary bombs.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>152</sup> For a discussion on the legal aspect, see, for example, this HRW dispatch on incendiary bomb use in Syria, see: "Syria/Russia: Incendiary Weapons Burn in Aleppo, Idlib," Human Rights Watch, August 16, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/16/syria/russia-incendiary-weapons-burn-aleppo-idlib>.

<sup>153</sup> "Syria/Russia: Incendiary Weapons Burn in Aleppo, Idlib," Human Rights Watch news release, August 2016.

## Incendiary Weapons in Aleppo

The east of Aleppo city also suffered under incendiary weapons attacks. Between September 22 and September 30, 2016, HRW recorded the use of incendiary weapons in the Aleppo neighborhoods of al-Kallaseh, Bustan al-Qasr, al-Asilah, al-Mashhad, and al-Sha'ar.<sup>154</sup> Thirteen incendiary attacks in total were reported on opposition-held districts of the city in the last four months of the year, according to the Syrian

<sup>154</sup> "Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo," Human Rights Watch news release, December 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>.

Archive.<sup>155</sup>

As one example, incendiary weapons were reportedly dropped in the al-Mashhad neighborhood in Aleppo's city center on August 7.<sup>156</sup> According to the White Helmets, the attack injured a child. The specific type of incendiary weapon used in the attack could not be identified, but photos showing at least four incendiary submunitions burning on the ground in a narrow street were published online by a Syrian activist.<sup>157</sup>

The Syrian Archive documented several other incendiary weapons attacks in Aleppo in the last four months of the year.<sup>158</sup> In September alone, videos claimed to show the use of incendiary weapons in the 1070 area on the night of September 2, in an unknown location on September 21, in Bustan al-Qasr on September 22, in the al-Bab road district on September 23, on the al-Salahin district on September 24, on the al-Mashhad, al-Fardous, and Bab al-Nayrab districts on September 25, and on the al-Sha'ar district on September 30.

#### CASE STUDY

#### The al-Mashhad and al-Qaterji attacks

On September 25, 2016, another incendiary weapon attack was reported in al-Mashhad. A video reportage published by Baladi News on YouTube and Twitter<sup>159</sup> provided a clear shot of a weapon remnant, which it was possible to identify as ZAB-2.5S/M ammunition by comparing the remnants with reference images of ZAB-2.5S submunitions.<sup>160 161</sup>

Similar submunitions were spotted two days earlier in the al-Bab road area, and five days later in the al-Sha'ar district. It cannot be established whether the buildings on fire, allegedly through the incendiary weapons, were used for civilian or military purposes.

Three weeks later, on the night of October 14, 2016, an incendiary weapon attack was reported in Aleppo's al-Myassar district. Radio Hara FM, a local broadcasting station operating from Aleppo city, published a video at 00:27 local time (UTC+2) on October 14, 2016, claiming to show the attack.<sup>162</sup> The accompanying descriptions accused Russia of a phosphorous attack. The video showed at least six fires in a park, on a street, and on a residential block. The scattered pattern and intense but localized burning were consistent with incendiary attacks recorded in other areas.

The same video was re-uploaded to Facebook by Halab Today TV, claiming the attack did not take place in the al-Myassar district, but in the neighboring al-Qaterji district.<sup>163</sup> Neither of the videos, nor other open sources, mentioned casualties.

The Radio Hara FM video can be geolocated to the exact location, which is on the border of a public garden between the al-Qaterji and al-Myassar neighborhoods—hence the disagreement.<sup>164</sup>

155 "Violation Database," Syrian Archive, [https://syrianarchive.org/database/?type\\_of\\_violation=3&weapons=6&location=1&startDate=01%2F09%2F2016&endDate=01%2F01%2F2017](https://syrianarchive.org/database/?type_of_violation=3&weapons=6&location=1&startDate=01%2F09%2F2016&endDate=01%2F01%2F2017).

156 "Syrian Developer"'s Twitter post. August 7, 2016, <https://twitter.com/SyrianDeveloper/status/762377999400460288> [archived].

157 Ibid.

158 All of these documented attacks and the visual evidence, located in the list of incendiary attacks in Aleppo city at [www.syrianarchive.org](http://www.syrianarchive.org)

159 Baladi News, Twitter post, September 26, 2016, [https://twitter.com/baladinews\\_en/status/780187866542534657](https://twitter.com/baladinews_en/status/780187866542534657).

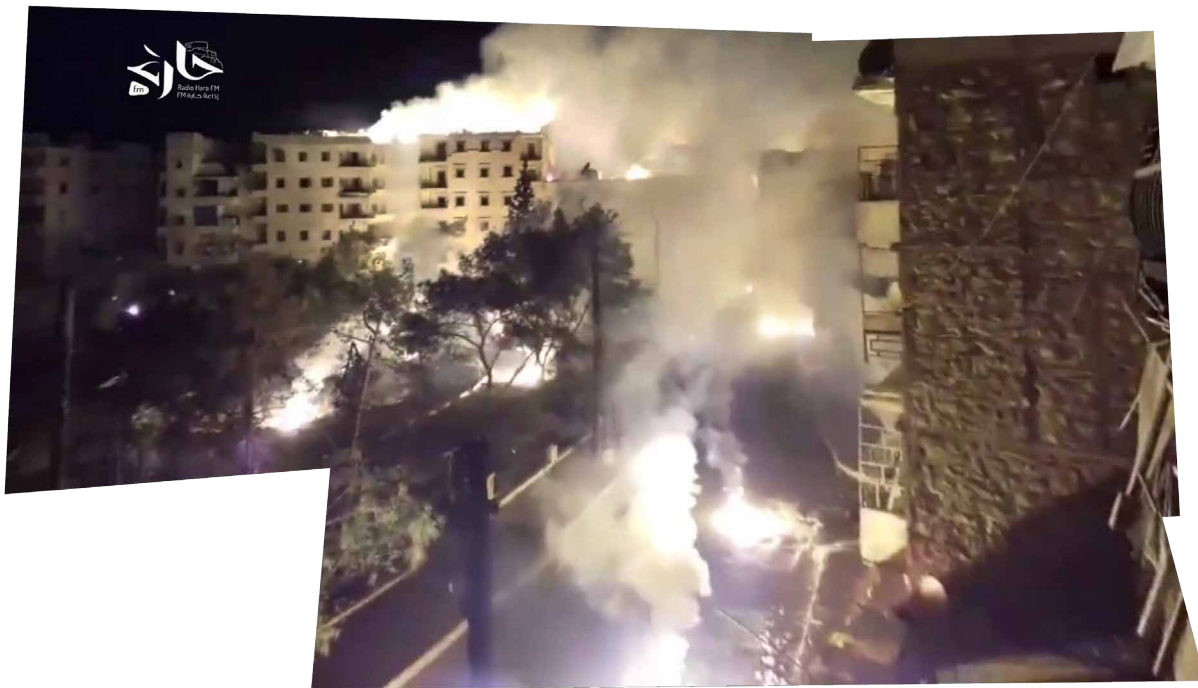
160 "РБК-500 ЗАБ-2,5 разовая бомбовая кассета с зажигательными БЭ," Airbase.ru, August 14, 2014, <http://www.airbase.ru/weapons/r/rbk-500-zab-2,5/>.

161 "РБК-500 ЗАБ-2,5 разовая бомбовая кассета с зажигательными БЭ," Airbase.ru, August 14, 2014, <http://www.airbase.ru/weapons/r/rbk-500-zab-2,5/>.

162 Radio Hara FM's Facebook post, October 14, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/radioharafm/videos/1775212032727350/> [archived].

163 Halab Today TV's Facebook post, October 14, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/HalabTodayTV/videos/1523509197666513/> [archived].

164 Maks Czuperski and Eliot Higgins, "Incendiary Attacks," Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, February 06, 2017. <https://medium.com/@DFRLab/incendiary-attacks-1475010ed695#.ryu8r95sr>.



A stitched panorama of different stills from the Radio Hara FM video showing incendiary submunitions burning in the al-Qaterji district in Aleppo city on the night from October 13 to October 14, 2016.

With regard to the date, it may well be that the attack occurred in the early morning of October 13, 2016, instead of early on October 14: Mohamed al-Khatib, a journalist based in Aleppo, already mentioned an incendiary weapon attack on the al-Qaterji neighborhood in the early morning in a tweet at 3:43 local time (UTC+2).<sup>165</sup>

Though local reports claimed white phosphorus was used, it is more likely that the video recorded the burning of incendiary thermite submunitions. According to HRW, many incendiary weapon attacks in Syria have been misreported as (white) phosphorus or napalm.<sup>166</sup> The little fires scattered around the buildings and public garden in al-Qaterji were also attributed to a phosphorus attack, but this may well have been a thermite weapon—a type of incendiary weapon witnessed more frequently in Aleppo city.

However, this question mark over the exact chemicals used does not extend to the residential nature of the areas that they were used against.

Multiple videos, posted from east Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria, showed the burning remnants of incendiary submunitions that had been dropped on residential areas. The Syrian Archive has collected visual evidence showing the use of RBK-500 ZAB-2.5S/M incendiary cluster bombs, whose remains were captured by a number of witnesses in Aleppo city.

This body of evidence comes from multiple sources, is consistent across multiple dates and locations, and is in line with further evidence from across Syria. The fire-bombing of Aleppo was not an isolated incident: it was part of a larger pattern. The phrase “Assad, or we burn the country” may have begun as a slogan, but it took on a grim reality.

165 “بي طخنا دمحم”, Twitter post. October 13, 2016. <https://twitter.com/MohAlkhatieb/status/786381733092528128> [archived].

166 Mary Wareham, “Dispatches: Incendiary Weapons Pose Civilian Threat in Syria,” Human Rights Watch, June 21, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/21/dispatches-incendiary-weapons-pose-civilian-threat-syria>.



# Cluster Munitions

A boy holds unexploded cluster bombs after jet shelling by forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in the al-Meyasar district of Aleppo February 21, 2013. Source: Reuters/Hamid Khatib

## DENIED, BUT DEPLOYED

Since 2012, cluster munitions have been regularly used in the Syrian conflict,<sup>167</sup> with a wealth of open source evidence showing their use despite repeated denials.<sup>168</sup> As with other kinds of weaponry, patterns of cluster bombing already observed across Syria were played out in east Aleppo, increasing in frequency within the city in the last six months of 2016. At least twenty-two incidents were reported in Aleppo city between July and December 2016.

Like so many other weapons used by the Syrian and Russian forces in the conflict, cluster munitions are intrinsically indiscriminate. They have been banned in 116 countries. In the words of the Cluster Munition Coalition, which argues for a worldwide ban, "Anybody within the strike area of the cluster munition, be they military or civilian, is very likely to be killed or seriously injured."<sup>169</sup>

The types of cluster munitions used in the conflict have been thoroughly documented, with numerous videos and photographs shared by groups and individuals from across opposition-controlled Syria.<sup>170</sup> From 2012 to the end of 2015, at least 2,221 cluster munition casualties were reported in Syria.<sup>171</sup> A wide range of types were used across the country before Russia joined the war in September 2015; following the Russian intervention, previously undocumented cluster munitions began to be recorded at attack sites.

Using a range of open source evidence, including investigations published by various NGOs, it is possible to verify the repeated use of cluster munitions in Aleppo city.

167 "Use of cluster bombs," Cluster Munition Coalition, undated timeline, <http://www.stopclustermunitions.org/en-gb/cluster-bombs/use-of-cluster-bombs/in-syria.aspx>.

168 "Syria denies using cluster bombs," CNN, October 15, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/15/world/meast/syria-civil-war/>.

169 "What is a cluster bomb?," Cluster Munitions Coalition, undated fact sheet, <http://www.stopclustermunitions.org/en-gb/cluster-bombs/what-is-a-cluster-bomb.aspx>.

170 For example, 2013: "VOA Finds Evidence of Syrian Cluster Bomb Use," VOA, March 4, 2013 [http://www.voanews.com/a/voa\\_finds\\_evidence\\_of\\_syrian\\_cluster\\_bombs/1614779.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/voa_finds_evidence_of_syrian_cluster_bombs/1614779.html); 2015 "More Russian cluster munitions used in Syria," Cluster Munitions Coalition US, October 11, 2015, <http://www.noclusterbombs.org/news/2015/10/11/russia-in-syria/>; 2016 "Russia/Syria: Widespread New Cluster Munition Use," HRW, July 28, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/28/russia/syria-widespread-new-cluster-munition-use>.

171 "Use of cluster bombs," Cluster Munition Coalition.



Left: Unexploded AO-2.5RT/RTM submunitions (Source—Human Rights Watch/Hussam al-Termanini) Right: Remains of a RBK-500 PTAB-1M cluster bomb photographed at the site of the M10 hospital after the October 1, 2016 attack (Source—Local activists/Bellingcat).

### **The use of cluster munitions in Syria**

Cluster munitions are designed to scatter explosive submunitions over a wide area. They are intrinsically indiscriminate weapons. Neither Russia nor Syria has signed the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions prohibiting their use;<sup>172</sup> however, the use of indiscriminate weapons in densely-populated civilian areas is illegal.<sup>173</sup>

According to the Cluster Munition Coalition, Syrian forces used at least 249 cluster munitions in ten out of Syria's fourteen governorates between July 2012 and July 2014. This number only reflects incidents in which remnants of cluster munitions were recorded and identified, so the actual figure may be higher. According to the same source, 2,221 people in Syria were killed or wounded by cluster munitions between 2012 and the end of 2015.<sup>174</sup>

Witnesses to the Syrian conflict have documented the use of a wide range of cluster munitions. Types identified include unguided air-dropped munitions such as RBK-500 series cluster bombs, surface-to-surface rockets, including the 122mm Saker rocket,<sup>175</sup> and 9M55K 300mm rockets launched by the modern Russian BM-30 multiple rocket launcher.<sup>176</sup>

172 Convention on Cluster Munitions, <http://www.clusterconvention.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/100-States-Parties-and-19-Signatories-3.pdf>.

173 See, for example: "Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo," Human Rights Watch, December 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>.

174 "Use of Cluster Bombs - Cluster Munition Use in Syria," Cluster Munition Coalition.

175 "SAKR 122mm Cargo Rockets & Submunitions in Syria," The Rogue Adventurer, January 15, 2013, <https://rogueadventurer.com/2013/01/15/sakr-122mm-cargo-rockets-submunitions-in-syria/>.

176 "Syria: New Deadly Cluster Munition Attacks," Human Rights Watch, February 18, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/18/syria-new-deadly-cluster-munition-attacks>.

When Russia began its air campaign in September 2015, previously undocumented cluster munitions began to be recorded at attack sites, in particular the AO-2.5RTM, ShOAB-0.5M,<sup>177</sup> PTAB-1M,<sup>178</sup> and SPBE submunitions<sup>179</sup> used with RBK-500 cluster bomb casings.

Following reports by Human Rights Watch,<sup>180</sup> Amnesty International,<sup>181</sup> and other organizations about the use of cluster munitions in Syria, the Russian Ministry of Defense denied any and all use of cluster munitions by Russian forces,<sup>182</sup> stating "Russian aviation does not use them," and going as far to claim were "no such munitions at the Russian air base in Syria."

These denials were exposed as false when photographs and video from Russian media, including Kremlin broadcasters Sputnik and RT,

177 "Russia/Syria: Daily Cluster Munition Attacks," Human Rights Watch, February 8, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/08/russia/syria-daily-cluster-munition-attacks>.

178 "PTAB-1M Submunitions Documented in Syria," Armament Research, March 2, 2016, <http://armamentresearch.com/ptab-1m-submunitions-documented-in-syria/>.

179 N.R. Jenzen-Jones and Yuri Lyamin, "SPBE Submunitions Employed in Syria," Armament Research, October 6, 2015, <http://armamentresearch.com/rbk-500-spbe-cargo-munitions-employed-in-syria/>.

180 "Syria: New Russian-Made Cluster Munition Reported," Human Rights Watch, October 10, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/10/syria-new-russian-made-cluster-munition-reported>.

181 "Russia's Bombing in Syria Has Killed Hundreds of Civilians - New Report," Amnesty International, December 23, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/russias-bombing-syria-has-killed-hundreds-civilians-new-report>.

182 "Russian Defence Ministry commented on briefing of Amnesty International and summed up results of operation carried out by the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria on December 18-23," Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, December 23, 2015, [http://eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12072315@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12072315@egNews).

# “Concerning the suppositions on cluster bombs. Russian aviation does not use them.”

Igor Konashhenkov, December 23, 2015

as well as the MoD’s own photographs, showed cluster munitions at the Russian air base in Syria, and even loaded onto Russian aircraft.<sup>183</sup> As detailed above, RT was later caught editing footage posted on their YouTube channel, removing footage of cluster munitions mounted on Russian jets at their airbase in Syria.<sup>184</sup>

Following the airstrike on the M10 hospital on October 1, local activists shared a photograph of a clearly identifiable RBK-500 PTAB-1M bomb casing from the site, with its identification numbers still legible.

When Russian unexploded ordnance removal teams began their work in eastern Aleppo, the Russian Ministry of Defense published a photograph showing the unexploded remains of AO-2.5RT/RTM<sup>185</sup> submunitions, confirming their use in Aleppo.<sup>186</sup>

The use of cluster munitions by both Russia and the Assad government in the Syrian conflict is therefore confirmed by a large body of evidence,

183 Levied, “Sputnik, RT and Russian MoD Expose Cluster Bombs at Hmeymim Airbase.”

184 Dearden, “Russia-Backed Broadcaster RT Cuts Footage Proving Use of Incendiary ‘Cluster Bombs’ in Syria.”

185 AO-2.5RT/RTM refers to AO-2.5RT and AO-2.5RTM cluster submunitions, the exterior of which are near identical apart from markings that show their specific designation. Unless the specific designation is known, this report refers to this particular submunitions as AO-2.5RT/RTM.

186 Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation’s Facebook post, January 2, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/1492252324350852/photos/a.1856126997963381.1073742335.1492252324350852/1856127094630038/?type=3&theater>.

including numerous images published by numerous groups, among them official Kremlin outlets.

## Cluster Munitions in Aleppo

In so many ways, Aleppo represents a microcosm of the broader conflict. Strategies and tactics developed across Syria in five and more years of fighting were brought to bear on the few square miles of the densely-populated city—including the use of cluster munitions.

Open source evidence and investigations by various NGOs have gathered information on repeated use of cluster munitions in Aleppo city over four years of fighting. In the second half of 2016, at least twenty-two incidents were reported in Aleppo city, based on data gathered from open sources and data provided by groups operating in opposition-controlled areas.

According to data from Syrian Civil Defense, nineteen adults and three children were killed in these attacks, with sixty adults and twenty children injured. The Syrian American Medical Society stated in their report, “The Failure of UN Security Council Resolution 2286 in Preventing Attacks on Healthcare in Syria,” that between June and December 2016 there were nine instances of cluster munitions being used against medical facilities.<sup>187</sup> Reports of these attacks came with additional visual data that in some cases allowed the aftermaths of the attacks to be geolocated to specific locations in Aleppo city.

Photographs from the site of the M10 hospital in Aleppo, for example, show the clearly identifiable remains of a RBK-500 PTAB-1M bomb. As discussed elsewhere, the hospital was repeatedly bombed in late September and early October.<sup>188 189</sup>

187 “2016 Was the Most Dangerous Year for Healthworkers in Syria,” Syrian American Medical Society Foundation, January 11, 2017, <https://foundation.sams-usa.net/reports/failure-un-security-council-resolution-2286-preventing-attacks-healthcare-syria/>.

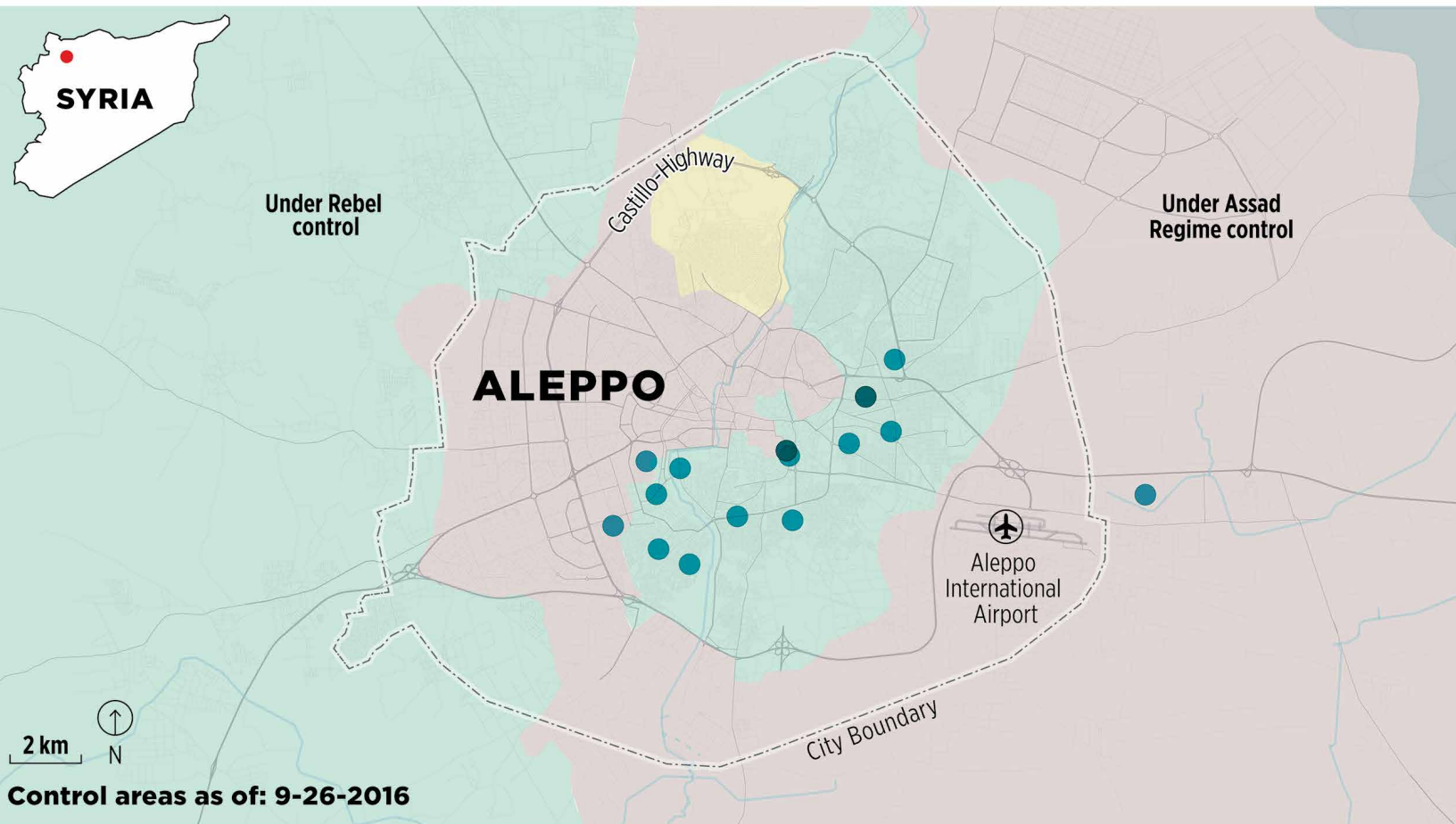
188 Eliot Higgins, “Fact-Checking Russia’s Claim that It Didn’t Bomb Another Hospital in Syria,” Bellingcat, November 9, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/09/fact-checking-russias-claim-didnt-bomb-another-hospital-syria/>.

189 Read the comprehensive case study of al-Salahin district cluster bombing online. Maks Czuperski and Eliot Higgins, “Cluster Bomb Chaos in Aleppo,” Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, February 7, 2017, <https://medium.com/@DFRLab/cluster-bomb-chaos-in-aleppo-73d46728a5fc#.r4otko3se>,” Bellingcat, November 9, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/09/fact-checking-russias-claim-didnt-bomb-another-hospital-syria/>.

# Use of Cluster Ammunition in and around Aleppo

Attacks between July 9th and November 26th 2016

- Cluster Bomb Attack
- More than one Attack
- Assad Regime
- Rebels
- YPG (Kurds)
- ISIS



info.BILD.de | Source: Atlantic Council, IHS, OSM

## “Dumb bombs”

While cluster munitions, chemical weapons, and incendiaries are the most notorious types of munitions used to attack eastern Aleppo, other air-dropped munitions have also been used. The vast majority of these munitions are unguided “dumb bombs,” as opposed to laser- or GPS-guided “smart bombs”: they rely on the skill of the pilot, rather than technological support, to accurately hit targets. This may account for the many examples of bombs destroying seemingly worthless targets, or the many near misses near hospitals.

A typical explosive bomb widely used in the conflict is the FAB 500-ShL high explosive, parachute-retarded bomb. The use of this bomb has been documented through videos and

photographs from across Syria showing FAB 500-ShLs that have failed to explode embedded in the ground.

Another type of unguided munition used in the conflict is the ODAB-500 series thermobaric bomb. These bombs are part of a family of weapons known as volumetric weapons, dispersing fuel into the air around the bomb moments before detonation. The fuel then ignites, creating a large fireball and causing a powerful shock wave.<sup>190</sup> These weapons are potentially devastating when used in densely populated areas,

<sup>190</sup> Kelsey D. Atherton, “Thermobaric Bombs and Other Nightmare Weapons of the Syrian Civil War,” *Popular Science*, October 5, 2016, <http://www.popsoci.com/thermobaric-bombs-and-other-nightmare-weapons-syrian-civil-war>.

such as Aleppo city, and, as with other weapons used in the conflict, unexploded examples present the best evidence of their use in Aleppo.

While the FAB and ODAB bombs represent only a small selection of the bombs used in the Syrian conflict and used to attack opposition-held Aleppo city, it is fair to say the vast majority of bombs used in the conflict are unguided munitions, with only a fraction of the munitions used by the Syrian and Russian air forces being guided bombs or missiles.

In the final months of the siege of Aleppo, increasing numbers of claims of the use of “bunker-buster” munitions emerged from local groups and organizations working in Aleppo. A bunker buster is a munition that is designed to penetrate hardened targets, or targets buried underground. The Syrian Air Force has used BetAB series bunker bombs for the length of the conflict, and the Russian Ministry of Defense has confirmed their use by Russian jets in Syria.<sup>191</sup>

Benyam Dawit Mezmur, Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, stated in October 2016 that “children are being killed and maimed. Airstrikes are hitting the few remaining hospitals. The use of bunker-busting bombs means children cannot even safely attend schools that are underground.”<sup>192</sup> Organizations including Save the Children,<sup>193</sup> SAMS,<sup>194</sup> and Human Rights Watch<sup>195</sup> have alleged the use of bunker busters in Aleppo.



Children standing on an unexploded ODAB-500 in Aleppo (Source—Local activists)

191 “Russian Warplanes Use Bunker Buster Bombs in Airstrikes in Syria,” Sputnik, November 3, 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201511031029523340-russia-bunker-buster-bombs/>.

192 “‘Bunker-buster’ bombs in eastern Aleppo mean children not even safe underground, UN experts warn,” UN News Center, October 3, 2016, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55193#.WH-AjPmLRPY>.

193 “Aleppo’s Children Not Safe from Bunker-Busting Bombs Even in Underground Schools,” Save the Children, January 2017, <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/2016-09/aleppos-children-not-safe-bunker-busting-bombs-even-underground-schools>.

194 “The Failure of UN Security Council Resolution 2286 in Preventing Attacks on Healthcare In Syria,” Syrian American Medical Society, January 11, 2017, <https://foundation.sams-usa.net/reports/failure-un-security-council-resolution-2286-preventing-attacks-healthcare-syria/>.

195 “Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo,” Human Rights Watch, December 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>.

# Chemical Weapons



A man covered with dust walks at a site hit by an airstrike in the rebel-held al-Ansari neighbourhood of Aleppo, Syria December 7, 2016. Reuters/Abdalmrhan Ismail

## FOG OF WAR

The final months of the battle for Aleppo were marked by frequent reports of chemical weapon attacks against opposition-controlled areas, both inside and surrounding the city. Again, this pattern had already been played out elsewhere in Syria and has every likelihood of continuing.

Since the Sarin attacks in Damascus on August 21, 2013, there have been dozens of reports of chemical weapon attacks across Syria using chlorine, sarin, mustard gas, and other agents.<sup>196</sup> In August 2016, the third report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations (OPCW/UN) Joint Investigative Mechanism<sup>197</sup> concluded that Syrian government forces had used chlorine gas in two attacks, and had probably committed several more, between

April 2014 and September 2015, including in cases where evidence had been removed; it also found that ISIS had used mustard gas in at least one attack.

The attacks detailed in the OPCW/UN report, and many additional attacks reported and documented by opposition groups, used helicopter-dropped “barrel bombs” holding cylinders of chlorine gas. The second half of 2016 saw at least ten reported chemical attacks, of which six could be verified, in Aleppo city itself. They shared many characteristics with the attacks in the OPCW/UN report, including the use of helicopters and gas cylinders, but also some differences.<sup>198</sup>

<sup>196</sup> Syrian American Medical Society, “A New Normal: Ongoing Chemical Weapons Attacks in Syria,” February, 2016, <https://www.sams-usa.net/reports/a-new-normal-ongoing-chemical-weapons-attacks-in-syria/>

<sup>197</sup> “Third Report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism,” OPCW-UN, August 24, 2016, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=s/2016/738](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=s/2016/738).

<sup>198</sup> “General Obligations,” Chemical Weapons Convention, OPCW, undated, <https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/articles/article-i-general-obligations>.

## Chemical Weapons Convention, Article 1.

Each State Party to this Convention undertakes never under any circumstances:

(a) To develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain chemical weapons, or transfer, directly or indirectly, chemical weapons to anyone;

(b) To use chemical weapons;

(c) To engage in any military preparations to use chemical weapons;

(d) To assist, encourage or induce, in any way, anyone to engage in any activity prohibited to a State Party under this Convention.

Even as the OPCW-UN were publishing their report in August 2016, fresh allegations of chemical weapons attacks were emerging in Syria, including in opposition-held east Aleppo. At the start of August two attacks were reported in the city, one on August 2,<sup>199</sup> and a second on August 10.<sup>200</sup>

In the August 10 attack, victims reported they had been hit by a barrel bomb containing chlorine gas dropped from a helicopter, a mode of attack consistent with other reports of chlorine gas use by Syrian government forces.<sup>201 202</sup> Over seventy individuals were reported injured in the attack, including approximately thirty young children; three deaths were reported, including two children. The UN's Syria Envoy, Staffan de Mistura said: "There seems to be a lot of evidence that it did take place."<sup>203</sup>

A further attack was reported on September 6,<sup>204</sup> with over 150 victims transferred for treatment in local medical facilities. Multiple witnesses reported the use of helicopters to drop the bomb, as well as the distinctive smell of chlorine at the attack site.<sup>205</sup> Two deaths were reported from the attack, one of them, a thirteen-year-old child. Al-Quds hospital treated many victims of the attack, sharing photographs of victims being treated on its Facebook page.<sup>206 207</sup>

A medical report provided to Bellingcat by doctors at the al-Quds hospital listed the details of the victims:<sup>208</sup> seventy-one patients treated as a result of the attack, including sixteen children below the age of five, twenty children between the ages of six and eighteen, and one pregnant woman. The report also stated that the victims were treated for exposure to chlorine.

The identification of chlorine as the agent is consistent with other reports, including statements recorded by various organizations and individuals working in the area. In a video published online by the White Helmets, a rescuer described the smell of chlorine at the attack site;<sup>209</sup> American pro-opposition journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem produced a video from the attack site stating "The smell of chlorine is very strong here";<sup>210</sup> and in a video from the SMART News Agency filmed at the entrance to the al-Quds hospital, one man said that he found one of the victims and they smelt of chlorine.<sup>211</sup>

199 "Syria: Fresh chemical attack on Aleppo a war crime," Amnesty International, August 11, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/08/syria-fresh-chemical-attack-on-aleppo-a-war-crime/>.

200 Hady al-Khatib, "Reports of Chlorine Gas That Targeted Civilians in Aleppo," Bellingcat, August 13, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2016/08/13/reports-of-chlorine-gas-that-targeted-civilians-in-aleppo>.

201 Search criteria "Chemical weapons, Aleppo, from August 1, 2016, to August 12, 2016," Syrian Archive, [https://syrianarchive.org/database/?type\\_of\\_violation=3&weapons=1&location=1&startDate=01%2F08%2F2016&endDate=12%2F08%2F2016](https://syrianarchive.org/database/?type_of_violation=3&weapons=1&location=1&startDate=01%2F08%2F2016&endDate=12%2F08%2F2016).

202 "ن الصا لساب دي هشل ا يفشم" s Facebook post, August 11, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/575531475817410/photos/a.575543335816224.1073741825.575531475817410/72884542748765/?type=1&theater> [archived: <http://archive.is/50QBZ>].

203 "Syria Conflict: Aleppo 'Chlorine Gas Attack' Investigated," BBC, August 11, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37049555>.

204 Hady al-Khatib, "Examining the Chemical Attack in Sukkari District in Aleppo, September 6th 2016," Bellingcat, September 23, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/23/examining-chemical-attack-sukkari-district-aleppo-september-6th-2016/>.

205 "Syria: New Deadly Chemical Attacks," Human Rights Watch, September 28, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/28/syria-new-deadly-chemical-attacks>.

206 "ن الصا لساب دي هشل ا يفشم" s Facebook post, September 6, 2016, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1093951590642060&id=575531475817410](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1093951590642060&id=575531475817410).

207 "ن الصا لساب دي هشل ا يفشم" s Facebook post, September 6, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/575531475817410/photos/pcb.1093951590642060/?type=3&theater>.

208 Al-Khatib, "Examining the Chemical Attack in Sukkari District in Aleppo, September 6th 2016."

209 "رولكل ل لماربب ير كسل ا فصق," YouTube, September 6, 2016, <https://youtu.be/qvIJfktU71c?t=26>.

210 "Aleppo is Besieged and Burning from Chlorine Attack," YouTube, uploaded by On the Ground News, September 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UY4Nisvqd6Q>.

211 "ب ل ح يف ير كسل ا ح ي ل ع رولكل ا زاغب ماظن ل ل فصق ب قان تبا خ شالاح," YouTube, uploaded by SMART News Agency, September 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeNCHUsZJpl>.



Gas cylinders recovered from the site of the September 06, 2016 chlorine attack (Source—Thiqa Agency) and Gas cylinders recovered from the site of the August 10, 2016 chlorine attack (Source—Local activists/Bellingcat)

Video footage **(2)** was also published showing the remains of the gas cylinders allegedly used in the attack.<sup>212</sup>

These were notably similar to the type used **(1)** in the attack of August 10, 2016.<sup>213</sup> One civilian in the video stated that “men, women and children were taken to the hospital as a result of the chemical attack. More than 50 people were transferred to the hospital. There are no bases for fighting groups in this area, it’s mainly inhabited by civilians.”

In the final weeks of the siege of Aleppo, there was a noticeable uptick in the number of reports of chemical weapon attacks against opposition areas in and around the city. At least ten chlorine attacks were reported in Aleppo city between October and early December, with the remains of yellow chlorine gas cylinders, as documented at other sites over the preceding two and half years across Syria, recorded by local activists at many of the sites.<sup>214</sup> The Syrian Archive project has verified and entered video pertaining to six attacks in Aleppo city during the last six months of 2016.<sup>215</sup>

Not all of the attacks were well-documented with video or open source records. Some attacks, however, left a larger footprint, making it easier to examine the veracity of the claims. For example, an attack in the suburb of Hanano on November 18 was reported to have killed one person and injured five others. A number of videos, images, and testimonies of this attack are available online and have been examined in detail.<sup>216</sup>

Several videos purport to show the aftermath of the attack, the remains of the cylinder, and children being treated in a hospital for respiratory issues as a result of the attack.

On November 20, a chlorine bomb was said to have been dropped on the al-Bab road neighborhood. Videos of the attack itself, and the resulting injuries, are limited, but subsequent footage from the site showed a chlorine gas cylinder with its labels intact.

In another attack on November 20, a man, his wife, and their four children were reported to have turned blue by the time rescuers got to them, after a barrel bomb was said to have fallen on their home. Videos and other open source information are available and appear to verify the claims.<sup>217</sup>

November 23 brought further alleged attacks, this time in the al-Jazmati and Ard al-Hamra neighborhoods, with limited injuries, according to the material available online. Two days later, Sheikh Maqsoud was allegedly hit with mustard gas by Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham forces, killing six and injuring fifteen, though no videos of the attack or the weapons used are available to verify the claims.

212 زاغى لى عىوحت یرتلا لىماربالب یركسلا ح فادهتسا || ةقت ةل اكو“ رولكل، YouTube, uploaded by Thiqa News Agency, September 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBJg67hNK3c>.

213 “August 10th Chemical Attack in Zabadiah, Aleppo,” YouTube, uploaded by YASSER Al-Haji, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNKUhtbU88Q&index=3&list=PLq6cQ--4f90g-RWraGCLntCM4yMy2TE\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNKUhtbU88Q&index=3&list=PLq6cQ--4f90g-RWraGCLntCM4yMy2TE_8).

214 Christiaan Triebert and Hady al-Khatib, “The CL2 Before the Storm — Alleged Chemical Attacks in Aleppo in the Last Months of 2016,” Bellingcat, December 19, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/19/the-cl2-before-the-storm/>.

215 Search criteria “Chemical weapons, Aleppo, from July 1, 2016, to December 31, 2016,” Syrian Archive, [https://syrianarchive.org/database/?type\\_of\\_violation=&weapons=1&location=1&startDate=01%2F07%2F2016&endDate=31%2F12%2F2016](https://syrianarchive.org/database/?type_of_violation=&weapons=1&location=1&startDate=01%2F07%2F2016&endDate=31%2F12%2F2016).

216 Triebert and al-Khatib, “The CL2 Before the Storm.”

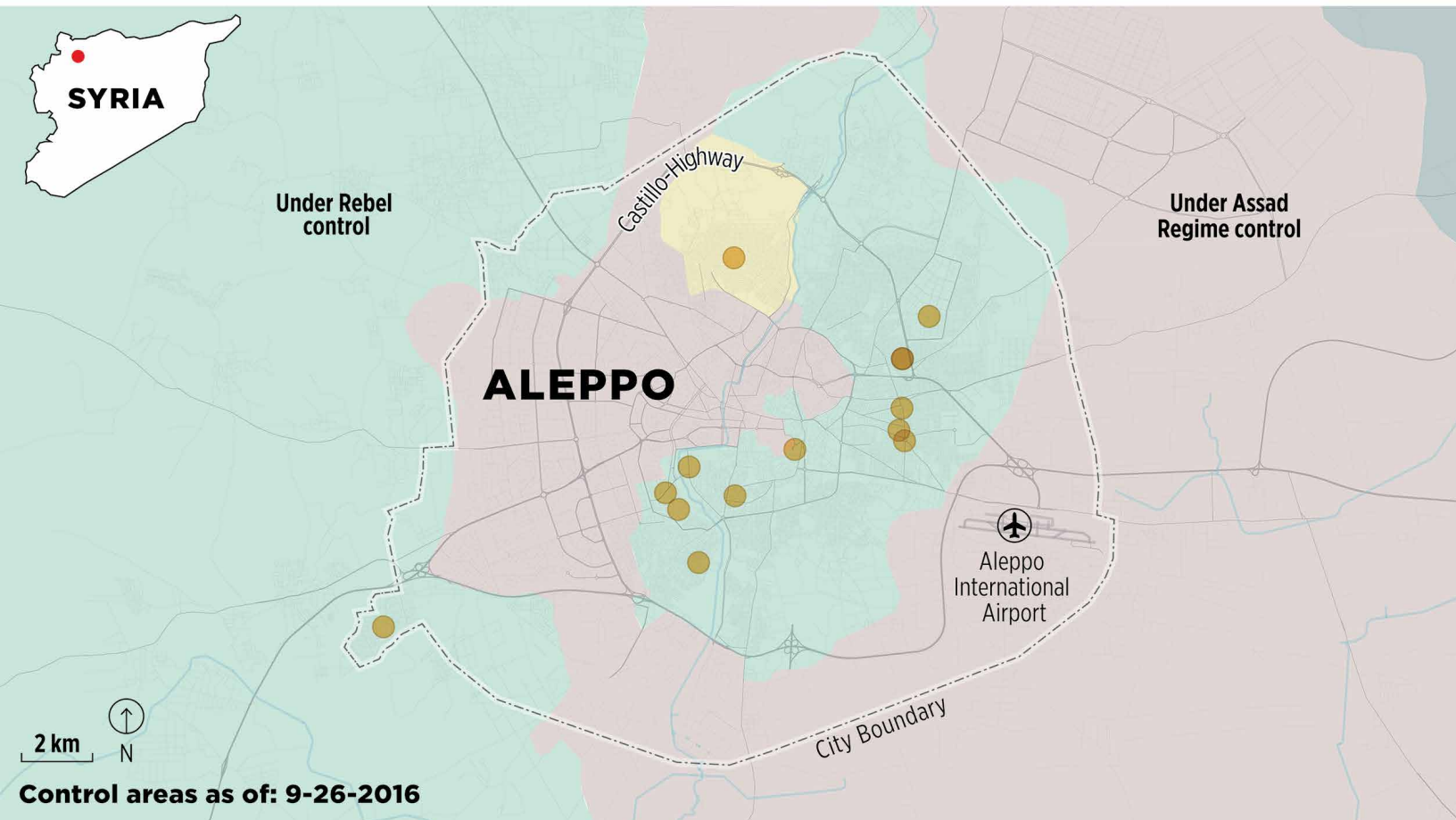
217 Video archived by the Syrian Archive, originally uploaded by Aleppo Media Center, November 20, 2016, <https://syrianarchive.org/database/37666/>.



## Use of Chemical Weapons in and around Aleppo

Attacks between August 8th and December 10th 2016

- Chemical Weapon Attack
- More than one Attack
- Assad Regime
- Rebels
- YPG (Kurds)
- ISIS



info.BILD.de | Source: Atlantic Council, IHS, OSM

These later attacks were rather unusual as, unlike in previous attacks, the chlorine cylinders were not dropped inside barrel-bomb casings.<sup>218</sup> In many earlier attacks, chlorine-filled cylinders had been placed inside the casings of explosive barrel bombs in various configurations. In the November and December Aleppo attacks, no casing was apparent. This change may be the result of the destruction of a suspected barrel-bomb factory in the summer of 2016.<sup>219</sup> Regardless, the end result was the same: the use of chlorine gas as a chemical weapon against opposition-controlled Aleppo.

218 J. P. Zanders, "Investigation of alleged chlorine attacks in the Idlib Governorate (Syria) in March - May 2015," *The Trench*, November 16, 2015, <http://www.the-trench.org/idlib-chlorine-attacks-2015/>.

219 "Explosions Rock Explosive Barrel Bomb Factory," *The Syrian Human Rights Committee*, July 17, 2016, <http://www.shrc.org/en/?p=27900>.

The frequency of the reports of these chlorine attacks on Aleppo in the last days of the siege is noteworthy. According to paragraph 81 of the OPCW/UN report,<sup>220</sup> monitors received allegations of forty-one chlorine attacks across the whole of Syria in the eight months between December 2015 and August 2016 (out of 131 alleged chemical attacks). According to witness accounts, the few remaining square miles of opposition-held Aleppo suffered at least ten chlorine attacks in the six weeks between mid-November and the end of the siege. In other words, east Aleppo alone suffered as many attacks in six weeks as the whole of the rest of the country had suffered, on average, in two months.

220 "Third Report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," OPCW-UN.

# Evacuation



Ambulances and buses evacuating people drive out of a rebel-held part of Aleppo, Syria December 15, 2016. Reuters/Omar Sanadiki

## AN AGONIZING FAREWELL

In November, Assad's final push to retake control of Aleppo began. Through the second half of November and into early December, thousands of people fled east Aleppo, seeking refuge from the military campaign. In a rapidly shifting and high-stakes situation that unfolded over several weeks, allegations of executions, arrests, and desperate pleas to be saved, swirled around in the media and diplomatic circles. Verification of specific cases and the circumstances of those in the city in real time was hampered by the constantly changing events on the ground.

After vetoes by Russia and China prevented the UN Security Council (UNSC) from passing a ceasefire resolution on December 6, a deal to evacuate the city was struck between the city's armed opposition and Russia. Opposition-controlled Aleppo was just 5 percent of the size it had been by the time the evacuations began on December 14.

Green buses are now a familiar sight in Syria, and have become a powerful symbol of the "reconciliation" policy being enacted across the

country. As the green buses rolled in and out of east Aleppo, a fraught and heavily choreographed evacuation carried the remaining survivors out of the city, and the villages of Foua and Kafraya. Buses were stopped or held up, the evacuation stalled entirely more than once, and in some cases evacuees were reportedly arrested, or killed.

By December 23, 2016, the evacuation of east Aleppo was over, and the Syrian government and its allies celebrated victory. Those who had left their homes registered as internally displaced, and aid agencies examined the scale of need, both inside and outside the city.

The evacuation was a relief for many, but not for all. Over 1,800 people from Aleppo were reportedly arrested in December alone; some of those arrests can now be verified. Executions, too, can be examined. Such examinations are essential when assessing the risk posed to those being evacuated or "reconciled" in other localities.

### The final offensive—civilians fleeing

The final offensive to break Aleppo began in late September 2016. Government forces and their allies quickly took back 15-20 percent of the opposition-held part of the city. Within a month, the opposition fighters made their own military play to break the siege, pushing through west Aleppo in a counter-offensive dubbed the “Battle of the Hero Martyr Abu Omar Saraqib.” The counter-offensive was doomed to fail and was rapidly quashed by pro-government forces. Its chosen route saw heavy civilian casualties in the government-held west of the city, with eighty-four fatalities reported during the operation.<sup>221</sup>

On November 4, Putin unilaterally declared a humanitarian pause in Aleppo and highlighted the fact that escape corridors were available for those who wanted to leave the east of the city, though few civilians from east Aleppo used them.<sup>222</sup> Humanitarian corridors had been offered previously. In July, leaflets were dropped offering exit via Bustan al-Qasr and Salah al-Din. According to activists who spoke to SiegeWatch at the time: “Two people attempted to use the corridors and were killed. Their bodies are still there because people can’t reach them because of the sniping.”

The final offensive began on November 15. Between November 15 and November 28, over 500 civilians were reported killed and more than 1,700 injured in the bombardment and heavy fighting in east Aleppo.<sup>223</sup> Around twenty-nine were killed in west Aleppo during the same period.

On November 27, government forces, along with their allies, established control over the Hanano neighborhood of east Aleppo. The push began to split the eastern enclave in two. Thousands began to flee the opposition-held enclave, and were taken to a processing center in Jibreen.<sup>224</sup>

On the same day, armed opposition groups withdrew to the southern neighborhoods within the shrinking enclave, to avoid becoming trapped. A deal was made with Kurdish People’s Protection Unit (YPG) forces under which the Kurds would come into the areas abandoned by the opposition, creating a more neutral front line and allowing some residents to stay in their homes. However, the areas were turned over to government forces, who thus gained control over the entire northern area of east Aleppo city including Sakhur, Sheikh Kheder, Haydariyah, and Suleiman al-Halabi.

Heavy bombardment of the remaining opposition area continued, and residents tried to flee. On December 2, an estimated forty-four people were killed by shelling<sup>225</sup> while fleeing their homes to seek safety in government controlled areas.<sup>226</sup> In another incident, an elderly woman died and was left in her wheelchair in al-Sha’ar, because it was too dangerous to recover her body.<sup>227</sup> Heavy bombardments continued through early December as discussions on evacuating the area began.<sup>228</sup>

### Deal-making: brokering the evacuation

On December 5, 2016, a UN Security Council Resolution calling for a seven-day ceasefire in east Aleppo was presented by New Zealand, Spain, and Egypt, but Russia and China vetoed it.<sup>229</sup>

As a counter proposal, on December 6, armed opposition groups in east Aleppo offered a three-point deal calling for a five-day humanitarian truce, the medical evacuation of five hundred people, and evacuation of civilians to northern rural Aleppo, as well as “launching negotiations between concerned actors over the future of Aleppo.”<sup>230</sup> According to a recent report from the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), the armed opposition groups were encouraged to make a deal by the citizenry of east Aleppo: “Civilians in the city clearly demanded the

221 Hwaida Saad and Anne Barnard, “Syrian Rebels Launch Offensive to Break Siege of Aleppo,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/29/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/29/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria.html?_r=0).

222 Joshua Berlinger, “Unilateral humanitarian pause in Aleppo begins,” CNN, November 4, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/04/middleeast/aleppo-syria/>.

223 Mahmoud Eskaf, “Aleppo: Rebels lose north-eastern parts, thousands stranded in the streets,” *Middle East Observer*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2016/11/28/aleppo-rebels-lose-north-eastern-aleppo-thousands-stranded-in-the-streets/>.

224 Sara Elizabeth Williams, “Thousands of civilians flee eastern Aleppo as Syrian government forces capture key district,” *Daily Telegraph*, November 27, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/27/exodus-aleppo-syrian-government-forces-capture-key-district/>.

225 @Mr\_Alhamdo, tweet, December 1, 2016, [https://twitter.com/Mr\\_Alhamdo/status/804476094183329792](https://twitter.com/Mr_Alhamdo/status/804476094183329792)

226 Erika Solomon, “Tens of thousands flee Aleppo as humanitarian crisis worsens,” *The Irish Times*, November 30, 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/tens-of-thousands-flee-aleppo-as-humanitarian-crisis-worsens-1.2887814>.

227 “Mr.Alhamdo,” post on Twitter, December 7, 2016, [https://twitter.com/Mr\\_Alhamdo/status/806410490238894080](https://twitter.com/Mr_Alhamdo/status/806410490238894080).

228 “Linashamy,” post on Twitter, December 8, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Linashamy/status/807125528553684993>.

229 “Security Council fails to adopt resolution calling for ceasefire in Aleppo,” UN News Center, December 5, 2016, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55721#.WH6SgJKpCL8>.

230 “Aleppo battle: Syria rebels call for truce to evacuate civilians,” BBC, December 7, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38233962>.



Syrian civilians being evacuated from Aleppo on December 7, 2016. (Source: ICRC)

leaders of armed groups to initiate the negotiations with the government forces in order to reach a ceasefire and give civilians the chance to evacuate the Eastern neighborhoods.”<sup>231</sup>

The advance of government and aligned forces continued, and by December 7, they were in control of almost 75 percent of the area previously held by the opposition. The following day, ICRC and SARC made a perilous trip to Dar al-Safaa, in the Old City<sup>232</sup> to rescue 150 people caught in the fighting. They were sheltering in what had originally been a home for the elderly, but had expanded to look after patients with mental health needs or physical disabilities as well. Several dozen civilians were also sheltering there.<sup>233</sup>

Russian MoD spokesman Sergei Rudskoy said up to 10,500 people, including 4,015 children, had left, although this figure was not confirmed. Military officials earlier put the figure at 8,000.<sup>234</sup> Russian MoD drone footage of civilians fleeing on December

8 showed the desperation of those trying to reach safety.<sup>235</sup>

Reports of men of military age disappearing after fleeing to government-held west Aleppo began to emerge<sup>236</sup> and were raised to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Images taken on December 11 that show dozens of men beginning their military training after being forced into military service, confirmed the whereabouts of some of them. Other images showed women and families of the men waiting outside the training venue.<sup>237</sup>

Also on December 11, a number of bloggers, activists, medics, and civilians made desperate pleas for their lives from east Aleppo as the enclave grew smaller and smaller, and the bombing more and more intense. Given the reports of civilians pushing the opposition groups to negotiate an evacuation deal, it seems likely these pleas were directed at all parties to the conflict, from the armed opposition to the UNSC, ICRC, the government and Russians. Heavy strikes and the clear sound of gunfights could be heard on an almost-constant basis in the background, as those making the pleas gave follow-up interviews to the international media about their fears.<sup>238</sup>

The calls were successful in one respect, when, on the evening of December 12, the ICRC put out a statement offering to oversee an evacuation attempt after a week of unsuccessful closed-door discussions with all sides.<sup>239</sup> The ICRC and other international organizations had not overseen evacuations in other areas of the country, after the UN received heavy criticism for its presence in the evacuation of Darayya in August. But Aleppo was so high profile, involved so many outside actors, and was so fraught and strategically important for both sides, that they offered to help. The call was a desperate move, but it worked.

By the following day, armed opposition groups controlled just 5 percent of their original territory.

231 “Special report on the evacuation of civilians from east Aleppo,” Center for Documentation of Violations, January 6, 2017, <http://vdc-sy.net/Website/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Aleppo-report-En-.pdf>.

232 SARC Aleppo, tweet, December 7, 2016, [https://twitter.com/SARC\\_Aleppo/status/806637701189566464](https://twitter.com/SARC_Aleppo/status/806637701189566464).

233 ICRC Syria, tweet, December 8, 2016, [https://twitter.com/ICRC\\_sy/status/806864800374542337](https://twitter.com/ICRC_sy/status/806864800374542337); “SARC and ICRC evacuate 150 civilians from Aleppo frontline,” ICRC, December 8, 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/sarc-and-icrc-evacuate-150-civilians-aleppo-frontline>; “Syrian war: Red Cross doctor’s heart-breaking letter from Aleppo,” BBC, December 8, 2016, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38257312?ocid=socialflow\\_twitter](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38257312?ocid=socialflow_twitter).

234 “Aleppo battle: UN says hundreds of men missing,” BBC, December 9, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38260388>.

235 @miladvisor, tweet, December 10, 2016, <https://twitter.com/miladvisor/status/807581803359928320>.

236 “Briefing Notes: Syria,” UNOHCHR, December 9, 2016, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21007&LangID=E>.

237 Patrick Hilsman, “Syria’s young men face an impossible choice,” Quartz Media, December 14, 2016, <https://qz.com/862890/aleppo-highlights-the-impossible-choice-faced-by-syrias-young-men/>.

238 @Mr\_Alhamdo, tweet, December 12, 2016, [https://twitter.com/Mr\\_Alhamdo/status/808533752439681024](https://twitter.com/Mr_Alhamdo/status/808533752439681024).

239 “ICRC plea to all sides to spare human life in eastern Aleppo,” ICRC, December 13, 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-plea-all-sides-spare-human-life-eastern-aleppo>.

Through talks brokered by Turkey, a ceasefire was called and an evacuation deal was reached.<sup>240</sup> Faruk Ahrar, who signed the agreement as one of the negotiators from the opposition side, said at the time: “Last night we signed the agreement with the Assad regime’s representative, the Russian representative, and a mediator called Omar Rahmoun. The agreement is in a written form and we possess a copy with the signature of the four parties mentioned including us. The agreement states that all fighters, civilians, and injured are to be evacuated.”<sup>241</sup> A side deal was made for armed opposition members with weapons to leave in cars, in exchange for prisoners of war.<sup>242</sup>

### Struck, and then stuck

On December 14, after the deal was struck and the ceasefire was in place, the first buses tried to reach east Aleppo. When they arrived at the last checkpoint, Iranian militias turned them back. The move was a power play by one of the sectarian elements within the group of actors operating in the area in support of Assad.<sup>243</sup> The move was devastating to those waiting for evacuation, who were caught between hope and a sense of helplessness. The situation was precarious. The actors on the government side had conflicting motivations for being involved, and the action seemed to suggest that Assad and Russia did not wield the kind of power over the disparate groups that they had indicated.

After frantic negotiations that lasted hours, a new deal was brokered on December 14. On December 15, the evacuations began. The first buses entered the area and gunfire was reported.<sup>244</sup> Videos of the shooting rapidly spread on social media<sup>245</sup> along

with images of a dead ambulance driver<sup>246</sup> and injured colleagues.<sup>247</sup> Eventually, later that day, thirteen ambulances and twenty buses carried out the injured and civilians—a total of 299 children, 678 civilian adults, and 28 wounded.

One health worker waiting for the evacuees at the arrival point in the west Aleppo countryside recounted his experience: “The day after we heard that the evacuations would proceed, we arrived at around 05:00 in the morning at the transfer point, or zero point as we called it, to meet the patients who were going to be evacuated and referred to health facilities. All teams were on the ground and hospitals were ready to receive patients. Ambulances were ready at zero point and more were stationed on the evacuation route from eastern Aleppo to Gaziantep. We waited for the first patients to arrive, but no one came. Ten hours later, at 15:00 in the afternoon, we were told that the first convoy was on its way. When I saw the first ambulance arrive, I started crying. I was not the only one – I noticed other colleagues hiding their tears. It was an unbelievable feeling of relief that this was finally happening. We had been waiting for this moment for the past 3 months. All of our plans were for this moment to happen.”<sup>248</sup>

Online forums suggested certain pro-government militias were planning to interrupt the evacuation.<sup>249</sup> Protesters also blocked the route, buses were stopped, and people were forced out of them according to photos and video leaked at the time.<sup>250</sup>

Maisara K, 20, one of the evacuees from eastern Aleppo, testified to VDC. “All men were gathered together including injuries, we were around 100, they started to check us and forcing to take off our clothes. They confiscated all personal papers and money. Then killed three people who they found personal arms with them.” His testimony was

240 @tzraik, tweet, December 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/tzraik/status/810510520520507392>.

241 “Interview of Farouq Abu Bakr, the head negotiator for the Aleppo evacuation deal,” YouTube video, shared on reddit.com January 3, 2017, [https://www.reddit.com/r/SyrianRebels/comments/5lNg87/interview\\_of\\_farouq\\_abu\\_bakr\\_the\\_head\\_negotiator/](https://www.reddit.com/r/SyrianRebels/comments/5lNg87/interview_of_farouq_abu_bakr_the_head_negotiator/).

242 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 22, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/811900325519118336>.

243 Kareem Shaheen, “Iran-backed militias block Aleppo evacuation as shelling resumes,” *Guardian*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/aleppo-residents-evacuation-uncertainty-ceasefire-deal-assad>.

244 Tom Perry, “Pro-Assad forces fire on convoy leaving east Aleppo: rescue workers,” Reuters, December 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-evacuation-idUSKBN1440R1>.

245 Zouhir al-Shimale, tweet, December 17, 2016 <https://twitter.com/ZouhirAlShimale/status/810189692662648833>; Channel 4 News, tweet, December 15, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Channel4News/status/809351437201342464>.

246 Mahmoud Rashwani, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/MahmoudRashwani/status/809876809152131073>.

247 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 15, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/809323698914267136>.

248 “Aid workers share experiences of evacuations from eastern Aleppo, Syria,” World Health Organization, January 2017, <http://www.who.int/features/2017/aleppo-evacuation-experiences/en/>.

249 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/809720954477801472>.

250 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/809965412033105920>; Riam Dalati, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/809964328501837824>; Riam Dalati, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/809931939465531392>.

“  
**When I saw the  
first ambulance  
arrived, I started  
crying [...]  
We had been  
waiting for this  
moment for the  
past 3 months.”**

**Healthworker in Aleppo, January 2017**

backed up by others.<sup>251</sup> A man called Abu Baker was reportedly killed, and his pregnant wife sustained bleeding and was taken away for medical attention. Reports indicated three deaths and injuries to six other evacuees. The militias confiscated the phones and personal belongings of some of the evacuees, before forcing them to turn back to eastern Aleppo.<sup>252</sup>

Rather than hide their actions, the incidents were claimed online by former residents of Nubil and Zahra, two Shia towns in the Aleppo countryside that previously had been besieged by opposition fighters.<sup>253</sup> Even the leaders of the community were open about their involvement,<sup>254</sup> while a Hezbollah-aligned group released a statement on the delays and the need to include Foua and Kafraya in the evacuation agreement.<sup>255</sup>

Late on December 17, a new deal was reached. This deal was even more complicated than the first, involving a heavily coordinated reciprocal series of evacuations and maneuvers between east Aleppo, the besieged pro-government Shia villages of Foua and Kafraya in the Idlib countryside under siege by JFS, and opposition-held Zabadani and Madaya in the Damascus suburbs that were besieged by Hezbollah and other government-aligned militias. The four towns had been tied into a tit-for-tat agreement brokered by the UN, called the “four towns agreement,” which meant any medical evacuation from one had to be reciprocated with evacuations from the other. The same was true for aid deliveries. Once Foua and Kafraya were in play, Madaya and Zabadani had to be, too. The fate of those in east Aleppo was now tied to four other locations, and theirs, in turn, to the fate of Aleppo.

On the morning of December 18, civilians in Foua and Kafraya waited to leave,<sup>256</sup> as did those in east Aleppo.<sup>257</sup> However, another problem was brewing. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and aligned groups burned several of the buses waiting to evacuate Foua and Kafraya.<sup>258</sup> The act was widely condemned by both sides,<sup>259</sup> but the culprits were defiant.<sup>260</sup> The burning led to a temporary postponement of the evacuations, but they soon resumed. On Sunday, December 18, evacuation from eastern to western Aleppo started again. An estimated one thousand vehicles evacuated civilians and the injured to field hospitals that day, but some of the buses were detained for extended periods on the way.<sup>261</sup>

Next day, Monday, December 19, three different convoys consisting of fifty-one buses and vehicles evacuated around three thousand people, while a convoy from Foua and Kafraya arrived in west Aleppo.<sup>262</sup> The UN Security Council unanimously agreed on a resolution to send UN officials and others to observe the evacuation. On December 20,

251 Aleppo evacuation monitoring Facebook group, video, December 17, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Evacuation.monitoring/videos/1764986190184920/>; Aleppo evacuation monitoring Facebook group, video, December 17, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Evacuation.monitoring/videos/1763952273621645/>; Charles Lister, tweet, December 16, 2016, [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/809808944009015296](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/809808944009015296); Zouhir al-Shimale, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/ZouhirAlShimale/status/809774029632638976>.

252 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/809737704225251328>

253 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/809969997556711424>.

254 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 16, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/809970562114211841>.

255 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/810553742219157504>.

256 @ResistanceER, tweet, December 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/ResistanceER/status/810463584669011969>.

257 @Mr\_Alhamdo, tweet, December 16, 2016, [https://twitter.com/Mr\\_Alhamdo/status/809799786765447168](https://twitter.com/Mr_Alhamdo/status/809799786765447168).

258 @Wasc\_algonquin, tweet, December 18, 2016, [https://twitter.com/wasc\\_algonquin/status/810486565289988096](https://twitter.com/wasc_algonquin/status/810486565289988096); @ResistanceER, tweet, December 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/ResistanceER/status/810484731812937728>.

259 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/810543207528460291>.

260 Riam Dalati, tweet, December 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/Dalatr/status/810536635381194754>.

261 Asaad Hanna, tweet, December 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/AsaadHannaa/status/810589560203866118>.

262 Angus McDowall, “Evacuation buses from Syrian villages arrive in Aleppo: Syria state TV,” Reuters, December 19, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-foua-idUSKBN1480HO>.

21, and 22, the convoys continued, evacuating over one thousand people each day, according to the VDC.<sup>263</sup>

ICRC's final estimate, on December 23, was that about 34,000 people had left east Aleppo. The evacuation was complete.<sup>264</sup> The World Health Organization reported that, "In total, 811 patients were referred to hospitals in west Aleppo and Idlib (sic), including 100 women and almost 150 children. Of those, nearly 100 patients requiring specialized care were transported to hospitals in Turkey. The other patients were referred to 8 hospitals in western rural Aleppo and Idlib."<sup>265</sup> Dr. David Nott, who treated some of the evacuees in Idlib, said: "They looked almost like they were coming out of a concentration camp. They were coming in not just injured but dehydrated, malnourished, and psychologically traumatised." In many cases, surgeons had to re-conduct amputations carried out in east Aleppo with little medicine and equipment.<sup>266</sup>

Those who were evacuated were split between the west Aleppo countryside, Jibreen, the government-held west Aleppo city, and east Aleppo, to which some returned. Those in the west Aleppo countryside and Idlib report airstrikes on areas near them after their evacuation and dissatisfaction with their accommodation.<sup>267</sup> In east Aleppo, looting by government militias has been a major problem.<sup>268</sup> The UN has not been able to gain access to the whole area,<sup>269</sup> being denied access by the Assad government and Russia; pro-Kremlin sources have

taken advantage of the fact to accuse the West of disinterest.<sup>270</sup>

### Reports of executions and arrests

Throughout the last weeks of 2016, there were reports of arrests and executions of people from east Aleppo. Some reports emerged when civilians went to west Aleppo for safety, others when the northern suburbs were taken back by the YPG and government forces, still more as suburbs came back under government control. Many of these reports came from sources who were unwilling to be identified, fearing for their own safety; it is thus difficult to verify them independently. Publicly identifying the victims, too, could endanger them further, so this report will only refer to such names as are already in the public domain.

In mid-January 2017, the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that it had documented the arrest or enforced disappearance of no fewer than 2,367 people from Aleppo governorate, including at least 89 women and 64 children, from July 1 to December 31, 2016.

As of January 20, all were believed to be in the Syrian forces' detention centers. Broken down by month, the cases are as follows:

<b>July:</b>	At least 61 people, including 11 women and 10 children
<b>August:</b>	At least 48 people, including 8 women and 6 children
<b>September:</b>	At least 65 people, including 6 women and 7 children
<b>October:</b>	At least 89 people, including 4 women and 9 children
<b>November:</b>	At least 61 people, including 13 women and 11 children
<b>December:</b>	At least 1897 people, including 47 women and 21 children

Dr. Mahmoud Alsato (also known as Abo Houzaifa) and his wife were both arrested when they left east Aleppo and fled to the west on December 14. The doctor was the manager of Alzoubdiyeh Primary Health Centre. His wife was released; as of January

263 "Special report on the evacuation of civilians from east Aleppo," Center for Documentation of Violations

264 @SARC\_Aleppo, tweet, December 23, 2016, [https://twitter.com/SARC\\_Aleppo/status/812392140231888900](https://twitter.com/SARC_Aleppo/status/812392140231888900).

265 "Aid workers share experiences of evacuations from eastern Aleppo, Syria," World Health Organization, January, 2017, <http://www.who.int/features/2017/aleppo-evacuation-experiences/en/>

266 Raf Sanchez, "They looked like they were coming out of a concentration camp": British surgeon David Nott treats Aleppo's wounded," *Daily Telegraph*, December 29, 2016, [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/29/looked-like-coming-concentration-camp-british-surgeon-david/?WT.mc\\_id=tmg\\_share\\_tw](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/29/looked-like-coming-concentration-camp-british-surgeon-david/?WT.mc_id=tmg_share_tw).

267 Zouhir al-Shimale, tweet, December 31, 2016, <https://twitter.com/ZouhirAlShimale/status/815194214896168960>.

268 @archicivilians, tweet, December 26, 2016, <https://twitter.com/archicivilians/status/813612804628475904>.

269 "Syrian Arab Republic: Eastern Aleppo Accessibility of UN and partners (as of 23 December 2016)," OCHA, December 23, 2016, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Aleppo\\_East\\_AoC\\_20161223\\_A4\\_ZOOM\\_eacAcc\\_map2\\_0.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Aleppo_East_AoC_20161223_A4_ZOOM_eacAcc_map2_0.pdf).

270 @Miladvisor, tweets, December 13, 2016, <https://twitter.com/miladvisor/status/808705001065484288>, January 15, 2017, <https://twitter.com/miladvisor/status/820743154802577408.s>

18, he was still detained.<sup>271</sup>

A correspondent for Aleppo Today, Ahmad Mustafa, and his father and two brothers were reportedly detained after they escaped east Aleppo; a younger brother was reportedly tortured before being released.

Abdulahdi Kamel, a member of the White Helmets, was captured while fleeing to safety with his family.<sup>272</sup> He was interviewed by pro-Kremlin media outlet ANNA News,<sup>273</sup> which is based in the breakaway Georgian territory of Abkhazia—a region that depends on Kremlin military and financial support for its existence. In the interview, Kamel confessed to having staged his rescues in order to receive financing from Europe, Turkey, and “the Gulf monarchs.” However, the White Helmets have said that the “confession” was made under duress,<sup>274</sup> and a follow-up investigation by independent outlet Middle East Eye quoted “local sources” as tracing Kamel to the “Air Force Intelligence security branch in Aleppo, where former prisoners frequently recount abuse by officers.”<sup>275</sup>

One former resident of east Aleppo who is known to this report’s authors said that one of his students, whom he named, was arrested on December 9, together with the student’s father. He also named four male members of a family from the al-Mayasser neighborhood as having been arrested. Another source said he knows “ten people who are arrested now and their families can’t meet them—they are in the secret police prisons.” He was not willing to name the detainees who were reportedly arrested, so verification of these vague reports is difficult.

Arrests of east Aleppo residents reportedly continued into January. On January 3, in Hidaria neighborhood, the identification documents of residents were collected; many young men were reportedly arrested the following day. Another source known to the authors said, “Two of my

relatives were arrested after they decided to stay in their houses when the regime’s militias were advancing.” He also named two other men, and a family group, who were arrested when they went from east to west Aleppo.

Accurate information on this issue is sketchy, as relatives are reluctant to provide information, for fear it will place their loved ones in still graver danger; however, the number of reports of arrests is increasing. The Caesar photos, so-called for the code-name of the alleged military defector who smuggled the material out of Syria in August 2013 and showed evidence of the torture and summary execution of thousands of detainees, are a chilling reminder of the fate victims of Syria’s prisons and security services can meet.

Executions were reported on three main occasions. In order to reduce confusion, only civilians reported executed are covered here, despite the fact that the summary execution of any captive is considered unlawful conduct under international law.

When opposition forces withdrew from the northern suburbs of east Aleppo and government forces came into the area, there were reports of executions. In several cases, photographic evidence was provided by former residents of east Aleppo who are known to this report’s authors. They named one of the victims as Mohammad Abdo Sultan, a mechanic who fixes generators whom they knew personally, and who was executed in the northern neighborhoods of east Aleppo beside an unnamed man, reportedly the owner of a bakery. There are other, less specific, allegations from this time.

The UN reported that they had received information regarding eighty-two executions in early December.<sup>276</sup> On January 20, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) confirmed in a telephone call that they had had “further corroboration of the executions we reported on in December, and of missing people.” A number of these deaths, which were believed to have been perpetrated by government-aligned militia, not SAA forces, have also been reported by the VDC. On December 12 and 13, the following executions were reported in Kallaseh: the Ajam family (five members),<sup>277</sup> the Hasan family (five

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271 ‘The Yearly Report for 2016’, Syrian Network for Human Rights, January 12, 2016: [http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The\\_Yearly\\_Report\\_for\\_2016\\_en.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The_Yearly_Report_for_2016_en.pdf).

272 Raed al-Saleh, tweet, January 10, 2017, <https://twitter.com/RaedAlSaleh3/status/818935170963279873>.

273 “White Helmets - the mask of terror, by ANNA News,” Tap News Wire, January 5, 2017, <http://tapnewswire.com/2017/01/white-helmets-the-mask-of-terror-by-anna-news/>.

274 Raed al-Saleh, tweet, January 10, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AmnestyUK/status/825036907075756033>

275 Lizzie Porter, “‘Beaten into confession’: Missing Syrian rescuer filmed denouncing White Helmets,” Middle East Eye, January 13, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrian-white-helmet-fake-confession-filmed-assad-regime-intelligence-prison-344419324>.

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276 “Syria: Aleppo terror and slaughter must be halted – Zeid’, OHCHR, December 13, 2016, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21024&LangID=E#sthash.uU8gVWUq.dpuf>.

277 “Ajam family 1,” Center for Documentation of Violations, December 12, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182567>.



members),<sup>278</sup> the Masri family (four members)<sup>279</sup> and an unidentified family (eleven members).<sup>280</sup> In Fardous, reports named the Qaseer family (six members),<sup>281</sup> the Hajjar family (twelve members)<sup>282</sup> and the Sande family (seven members,<sup>283</sup> perhaps more<sup>284</sup>), while in Salheen, the Ekko family (ten members) was named.<sup>285</sup>

These were not the only deaths. Days earlier, it was reported that a man named Mohammad Abo al-Ward and two of his brothers had been executed in al-Sha'ar by Assad troops after they went to a government-held area with their family.<sup>286</sup> On December 23, a former resident of east Aleppo reported that 6 people had been captured in the al-Sakhr neighborhood of Aleppo and killed, including men named Waleed Mostafa Aljadla and Haj Hammoud Alaswad.

More killings were reported to have taken place on December 25, 2016, in a series of field executions in Jibreen, the area to which many evacuees of east Aleppo were taken for processing and screening, and to receive aid, medical care, and other humanitarian services. The names of those reported dead were: Ali Awwad,<sup>287</sup> Hasan al-Awadhi,<sup>288</sup> Khaleel Faqqas,<sup>289</sup>

Yaser Bairakdar,<sup>290</sup> Jomaa Abdul Wahed,<sup>291</sup> Yousef Jaberi,<sup>292</sup> Ali Amouri,<sup>293</sup> Hassan al-Azwar,<sup>294</sup> Ghiath al-Younes,<sup>295</sup> Haytham Khamees,<sup>296</sup> Abed Akkam,<sup>297</sup> Kamel al-Omarain,<sup>298</sup> Hasan Hammami,<sup>299</sup> Farouk al-Bushi,<sup>300</sup> and Jasem Ajjan al-Hadeed.<sup>301</sup>

It has been possible to identify over one hundred victims of these summary executions through the last two months of 2016. How many more died in this way during that time, or how many still await the same fate is, as yet, impossible to say. The risk of execution, or arrest, is one faced by others in besieged areas in Syria, and will become an increasing concern as local truces are agreed between the opposition and the government, and areas return to government control.

278 "Hasan family 1," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 12, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182572>.

279 "Masri family 1," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 12, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182577>.

280 "Unidentified 1," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 12, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182581>.

281 "Qaseer family 1," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 12, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182592>.

282 "Hajjar family 1," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 12, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182598>.

283 "Sande family 1," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 12, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182605>.

284 Kenan Rahmani, tweet, December 13, 2016, <https://twitter.com/KenanRahmani/status/808890854496669696>

285 "Ekko family 10," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 12, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182621>.

286 "Mohammad Abo al-Ward," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 10, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/182508>.

287 "Ali Awwad," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183635>.

288 "Hasan al-Awadhi," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183636>.

289 "Khaleel Faqqas," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183637>.

290 "Yaser Bairakdar," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183638>.

291 "Jomaa Abdul Wahed," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183639>.

292 "Yousef Jaberi," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183640>.

293 "Ali Amouri," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/18364>.

294 "Hassan al-Azwar," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183642>.

295 "Ghiath al-Younes," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183643>.

296 "Haytham Khamees," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183644>.

297 "Abed Akkam," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183645>.

298 "Kamel al-Omarain," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183646>.

299 "Hasan Hammami," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183647>.

300 "Farouk al-Bushi," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183648>.

301 "Jasem Ajjan al-Hadeed," Center for Documentation of Violations, December 25, 2016, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/details/martyrs/183649>.

# Disinformation



## THE BATTLE AGAINST THE EVIDENCE

Aleppo was not broken in the darkness. Numerous witnesses provided evidence, some of it conflicting but much of it consistent, to substantiate claims of chemical attacks, barrel bombs, air strikes on hospitals and schools, and the deaths of thousands of civilians.

Throughout the siege, the Syrian and Russian governments waged a battle against the evidence, denying the facts, misrepresenting the victims, and attacking the witnesses.

These attacks were consistent across so many platforms that they took on the appearance of a separate disinformation campaign, aimed at distracting attention from events on the ground by focusing on discrediting, and silencing, the ones who were reporting them.

“  
**Aleppo was not  
broken in the  
darkness.”**

Members of the Civil Defense rescue children after what activists said was an air strike by forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in al-Sha'ar neighbourhood of Aleppo, Syria June 2, 2014. Reuters/Sultan Kitaz

## Denying the deeds

The simplest response to allegations of civilian casualties and indiscriminate strikes was to deny them. Throughout the conflict, and in defiance of the evidence, both the Syrian and Russian governments rejected such allegations outright.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad played a leading role:

*Q: So you're not using chemical weapons?*

*A: Definitely not.*<sup>302</sup>

*Q. But you wouldn't deny that, included under the category of bombs, are these barrel bombs, which are indiscriminate weapons?*

*A: No, there are no indiscriminate weapons. When you shoot, you aim, and when you aim, you aim at terrorists in order to protect civilians. Again, if you're talking about casualties, that's war. You cannot have war without casualties.*<sup>303</sup>

*Q: And yet you are not seen as a unifying force in Syria; people think that the society is torn apart. Just to use one example, on a personal level, you trained as a doctor and yet your administration stands accused of targeting medical and rescue workers as they race to save lives. How do you make peace with this? And is this a society that, after suffering such consequences, can really just forget the past and move on?*

*A: I cannot answer that question while it's filled with misinformation. Let us correct it first. We don't attack any hospital.*<sup>304</sup>

In September 2016, Assad even denied that there was any difference between barrel bombs and precision weapons:

*When they talk about barrel bombs, what are barrel bombs? It's just a title they use in order to show something which is very evil that could kill people indiscriminately, and as I said, because in the media "when it bleeds, it leads." They don't talk about bombs; they call it barrel bombs. A bomb is a bomb, what's the difference between different kinds of bombs? All bombs are to kill,*

*but it's about how to use it. When you use an armament, you use it to defend the civilians. You kill terrorists in order to defend civilians. That's the natural role of any army in the world. When you have terrorists, you don't throw at them balloons or you don't use rubber sticks, for example. You have to use armaments. So, it's not about what the kind of armament, it's about how to use it.*<sup>305</sup>

Denials such as these continued throughout the siege, but they increasingly drew skepticism and fact-checking. This was particularly the case of the Russian MoD's briefings, such as the October 25 press conference that presented side-by-side satellite imagery to claim that reports of airstrikes on the M10 hospital were "mere fakes" (see chapter on hospitals, above).<sup>306</sup> The MoD's claim was debunked;<sup>307</sup> further analysis exposed a pattern of deception.<sup>308</sup> The phrase "Russia Denies" had already led to the creation of a parody Twitter account, but it gained a new lease on life with the Aleppo siege.<sup>309</sup>

## Militarizing the victims

In parallel to the campaign of denial, Syrian and Russian officials repeatedly misidentified their targets, presenting civilians as combatants. Again, Assad led the way:

*Q: Can we talk about the humanitarian situation a little bit? One of the effective military tactics your... the Syrian Army has used, is to isolate areas held by rebels, and effectively to starve them out. But that has had the effect also to starve the civilians, and that, again, is against the laws of war, starving civilians.*

*A: That's not correct for one reason, because in most of the areas where the rebels took over, the civilians fled and came to our areas, so in most of the areas that we encircle and attack are only militants.*<sup>310</sup>

<sup>302</sup> "President al-Assad to BBC news: We are defending civilians, and making dialogue," SANA, transcript of BBC interview, February 10, 2016, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=28047>.

<sup>303</sup> "President al-Assad to BBC news: We are defending civilians, and making dialogue," SANA

<sup>304</sup> "Full transcript of AP interview with Syrian President Assad," Fox News, September 22, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/09/22/full-transcript-ap-interview-with-syrian-president-assad.html>.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> "Брифинг НГОУ ГШ ВС РФ генерал-лейтенанта С.Ф. Рудского," YouTube, October 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BGQeYf2t6w&feature=youtu.be&t=295>.

<sup>307</sup> Eliot Higgins, "Fact-Checking Russia's Claim that It Didn't Bomb Another Hospital in Syria," Bellingcat, November 9, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/09/fact-checking-russias-claim-didnt-bomb-another-hospital-syria>.

<sup>308</sup> Eliot Higgins, "Lie in the Sky", Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab, November 12, 2016, <https://medium.com/@DFRLab/lie-in-the-sky-224186b6e98c#.I5fkchedg>.

<sup>309</sup> RussiaDenies, tweet, November 30, 2016, <https://twitter.com/RussiaDenies/status/804064754197286912>.

<sup>310</sup> "President al-Assad to BBC news: We are defending civilians, and making dialogue," SANA.

The re-branding of civilians as legitimate military targets covered both entire city areas and individual buildings, as Assad loyalist member of parliament (MP) Fares Shehabi demonstrated when defending air strikes on hospitals in December 2016:

*Q: Why do you bomb hospitals in which your own constituents, your own civilians are seeking aid to help them repair the wounds that your air force has inflicted?*

*A: If they really care about hospitals, why would they turn state-owned hospitals into command centers for al-Qaeda?*<sup>311</sup>

Shehabi's comment is particularly noteworthy as it appears to justify striking hospitals, contradicting the earlier denials.

The militarization of the victims was not uniform: both Russian and Syrian statements referred to the civilian population, often as "hostages" of terrorist groups,<sup>312</sup> and expressed an interest in protecting them.<sup>313 314</sup>

However, repeatedly, Syrian and Russian rhetoric blurred the distinction between al-Qaeda-linked forces and other groups, to create an impression that all were extremists. Russian Ministry of Defense spokesman Sergey Rudskoy commented on August 8, 2016:

*Jabhat al-Nusra militants, which now call themselves Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, as well as their allied groupings of the so-called moderate opposition keep attacking government troops.*<sup>315</sup>

In an interview published in December 2015, Assad turned a question of civilian casualties caused by his forces to characterize the entire uprising against him as "terrorists":

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<sup>311</sup> "Jon Snow challenged Aleppo MP Fares Shehabi," YouTube, December 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyvW7fCmpvc>.

<sup>312</sup> "Deputy Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov stressed that operation in Aleppo was an exclusively humanitarian mission," Russian Ministry of Defense, July 29, 2016, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12091165@egNews>.

<sup>313</sup> "Full transcript of AP interview with Syrian President Assad," Fox News

<sup>314</sup> "Speech of the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces lieutenant-general Sergei Rudskoy before representatives of mass media," Russian Ministry of Defense, August 1, 2016, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12091371@egNews>.

<sup>315</sup> "Speech of the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Lieutenant-General Sergei Rudskoy before media representatives," Russian Ministry of Defense, August 8, 2016, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12092560@egNews>.

"The rhetoric that has been repeated in the West for a long time ignores the fact that, from day one, terrorists were killing innocent people," Assad said.

He continued, "It also ignores the fact that many of the people killed were supporters of the government."<sup>316</sup>

### **Attacking the witnesses**

Increasingly during the siege, however, eyewitness evidence discredited these claims: airstrikes were hitting civilian buildings, and civilians were dying. In response, Syrian and Russian officials began to attack the credibility of those witnesses.

One of the most important witnesses to the suffering was the aid organization initially called Syria Civil Defense, and later dubbed the "White Helmets" after their trademark headgear.

In Aleppo, the White Helmets began as a rescue organization in early 2013.<sup>317</sup> As the conflict intensified and independent journalists no longer had access to the front lines, they increasingly became a main source of evidence of the true nature of the bombings, posting GoPro footage of airstrikes and their aftermath. This put them on a collision course with the government and its allies:

*Q: We have eyewitnesses that were relatives, we have the White Helmets, we have many people saying that they witnessed helicopters in the air. Now, only the Syrians and the Russians have helicopters. Are you saying this is just invented?*

*A: Those witnesses only appear when there's an accusation against the Syrian Army or the Russian, but when the terrorists commit a crime or massacre or anything, you don't see any witnesses, and you don't hear about those White Helmets. So, what a coincidence.*<sup>318</sup>

The attacks came from the highest levels of government in both Syria and Russia, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accusing the group of faking its evidence.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Hala Jaber, "'Britain's airstrikes are doomed to fail,'" interview with Assad, Sunday Times, December 6, 2015, <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/focus/article1641838.ece>.

<sup>317</sup> Matthieu Aikins, "Whoever Saves a Life," Matter, September 15, 2014, <https://medium.com/matter/whoever-saves-a-life-1aeea20b782#.b60t2sth9>.

<sup>318</sup> AP interview, September 22, 2016

<sup>319</sup> "Press release No. 16/16: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the situation in Syria and Aleppo," Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Malta, December 14, 2016, [http://www.malta.mid.ru/eng/news\\_116.pdf](http://www.malta.mid.ru/eng/news_116.pdf).



Civil defense members carry a casualty after an airstrike at a field hospital in the rebel held area of al-Sukari district of Aleppo, Syria April 27, 2016. Reuters/Abd alrhman Ismail

*In a number of cases, these attempts have already been exposed. There is that organization called the White Helmets. The BBC went as far as nominate it for the Nobel peace prize. What these White Helmets do is pretend to save people from under the rubble left after Russian air strikes. The BBC even showed footage of this kind, but later the full video appeared on YouTube in which not only do we see how a man is extracted from the rubble, but also how he gets into it so that he can be saved. They did a few takes. The BBC was even forced to offer excuses, and later came out with a statement that these White Helmets were just kidding. What an innocent statement. There was also this story about an eight-year old girl Aya who, if the reports are to be believed, was saved from certain death three times on the same day by different people in different Syrian cities. She also appeared in a fake video.*

Lavrov's claim combined two stories. The accusation of a staged rescue can be traced back to a "Mannequin Challenge" video, posted by White Helmet volunteers on YouTube, for which the organization was widely criticized, and

apologized.<sup>320</sup> The video originated as a misguided attempt to bring attention to the conflict, in the same way a Pokemon Go launch had been used to draw attention to the situation in Douma.<sup>321</sup> It was a serious error of judgement, as the organization itself admitted, but to present it as proof that the White Helmets systematically fake evidence was disingenuous.

The triple rescue of the "eight-year-old girl called Aya," meanwhile, was originally launched in a meme online, repeated by Canadian activist Eva Bartlett at a press conference at the United Nations on December 9, and widely amplified by the Kremlin media.<sup>322</sup>

<sup>320</sup> "White Helmets backlash after Mannequin Challenge video," BBC News, November 24, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38066791>.

<sup>321</sup> "Extreme no chill Pokemon Go (Douma, Syria)," 9gag.com, undated, <http://9gag.com/gag/aYLym20/extreme-no-chill-pokemon-go-douma-syria>.

<sup>322</sup> See for example "Watch Canadian Journalist Completely Dismantle Mainstream Narrative on Syria," Sputnik, December 11, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201612111048424532-eva-bartlett-press-conference-syria>, and "Credible or fake? Journalists clash in fiery RT debate on news sources in Syria," RT, December 16, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/370581-syria-news-sources-debate/>.

According to Bartlett, the White Helmets' video footage "actually contains children that have been recycled in different reports. So you can find a girl named Aya who turns up in a report in say August, and she turns up in the next month in two different locations."

However, UK independent broadcaster Channel 4, which has regularly used White Helmets video footage in its reporting, fact-checked Bartlett's claim and the photo-montage meme, and concluded it was "almost certainly nonsense," adding, "We think it is beyond reasonable doubt that the three little girls in these pictures are different people."<sup>323</sup>

Lavrov is not the only Russian official to have accused the White Helmets of systematic fakes. On October 22, Russian MoD spokesman Major-General Igor Konashenkov accused UNICEF of "falling victim to another hoax by the White Helmets."<sup>324</sup> In December, state internet agency Sputnik wrote that "journalists have repeatedly condemned the 'White Helmets' for distributing lies"<sup>325</sup> and claimed that they had been "discredited as radical militants engaging in spreading propaganda."<sup>326</sup>

Fraud was not the only claim leveled at the White Helmets. During the siege, Syrian and Russian officials and media also accused them of working with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and therefore al-Qaeda.

Shehabi, for example, regularly attacked the group on Twitter, conflating them with Islamist extremists and linking them to atrocities, including beheadings.<sup>327</sup>

He also tied the group to NATO, as did a number of other sources,<sup>328</sup> including activist Vanessa Beeley, one of the most vocal critics of the White Helmets, who called them "NATO's pseudo 'NGO' construct."<sup>329</sup> This NATO linkage is false and betrays a deep ignorance of the difference between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the various countries that belong to it; it does nothing for the credibility of those who made the claim.

Meanwhile, on September 20, after the UN aid convoy air strike, Sputnik quoted the Russian MoD in three separate reports as saying: "The perpetrator of the fire, as well as his goal may be known by members of the White Helmets organization that has connection to the Nusra Front terrorists who have 'accidentally' been at the right time and in the right place with cameras."<sup>330</sup> Two further reports added the word "allegedly" to the quote.<sup>331</sup>

A week later, Sputnik columnist Finian Cunningham called the White Helmets "propaganda conduits for al-Qaeda terror groups";<sup>332</sup> on October 23, the same columnist wrote, "Virtually all the information that the West relies on for its allegations is sourced from Western and Saudi-funded organizations such as the so-called White Helmets and Aleppo

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323 "FactCheck: Eva Bartlett's Claims About Syrian Children," Channel 4 FactCheck, December 20, 2016, <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-eva-bartletts-claims-about-syrian-children>.

324 "Russia Registered US Attack Drone In Area Where Idlib School Was Attacked - MoD," Sputnik, October 27, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201610271046810904-idlib-school-russia/>.

325 "Saudi Media Waging Information War, Spreading Fake Images of Horror in Aleppo," Sputnik, December 15, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201612151048579672-aleppo-media-war/>.

326 "'Two Moms' Behind #StandWithAleppo Revealed to be Professional Propagandists," Sputnik, December 18, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201612181048717861-standwithaleppo-origins-analysis/>.

327 Fares Shehabi, tweet, October 8, 2016, <https://twitter.com/ShehabiFares/status/784669733748609024>

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328 "Fact-sheet on the White Helmets," Off-Guardian.org, October 5, 2016, <https://off-guardian.org/2016/10/05/fact-sheet-on-the-white-helmets/>. This states, "The NATO White Helmets are primarily a media campaign."

329 Vanessa Beeley, "EXCLUSIVE: The REAL Syria Civil Defence Expose Fake White Helmets As Terrorist-Linked Imposters," 21st Century Wire, September 23, 2016, <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/09/23/exclusive-the-real-syria-civil-defence-expose-natos-white-helmets-as-terrorist-linked-imposters/>.

330 "Russian, Syrian Jets Did Not Conduct Airstrikes on UN Convoy in Aleppo - MoD," Sputnik, September 20, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201609201045504075-russia-syria-convoy/>; "'Cowards': UN Chief Slams Attack on Aid Convoy in Syria's Aleppo," Sputnik, September 20, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201609201045510690-un-aid-convoy/>;

"Attack on UN Aid Convoy 'Game-Changer' - De Mistura," Sputnik, September 20, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201609201045514001-un-convoy-mistura/>.

331 "Russian MoD Releases Footage of Attacked UN Aid Convoy in Syria's Aleppo," Sputnik, September 20, 2016; <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201609201045521488-aleppo-un-convoy/>, "UN Convoy Attack in Aleppo Shifts Attention from Coalition Strike on Syrian Army," Sputnik, 25 September 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201609251045685838-un-convoy-attack-aleppo/>.

332 Finian Cunningham, "Western Hysterics as Its Criminal War in Syria Unravels," Sputnik, September 27, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201609271045753440-western-hysterics-criminal-war-syria>.

Media Center, both of whom are embedded with proscribed terror groups like Jabhat al Nusra.”<sup>333</sup>

As Cunningham’s comment shows, Kremlin officials and media also amplified the claim that the White Helmets could not be relied upon as sources, because they were funded by a number of Western governments.

Thus, on November 18, Konashenkov rejected claims of strikes on civilian targets, saying, “The so-called reports about ‘hospitals’ and ‘schools’ allegedly located in terrorist-held Syrian territory were created by the ‘White Helmets’ group financed by London.”<sup>334</sup>

Kremlin media interviewed a number of commentators who made the same accusation. These included Beeley, a regular commentator for RT and Sputnik, whom Shehabi hosted in Aleppo. She said that the White Helmets “cannot be considered anything other than an extension of the propaganda and the actual proxy war inside Syria; they are an infiltration agent for the US coalition inside Syria.”<sup>335</sup>

They also included German politician Albracht Müller, quoted as listing the White Helmets among “NGOs which receive large donations from the EU and the US, are mainly located in the areas controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra.”<sup>336</sup>

Müller continued: “They cover the situation only from one side and comment on it in a corresponding way. Thus, the White Helmets is being portrayed as a neutral aid organization and not as an organization financed and inspired by the West.” Insofar as these commentators’ opinions are sincerely held, reporting them is acceptable journalism; reporting them repeatedly without presenting any other point of view is not.

333 Finian Cunningham, “US, Allies Massacre at Will, Yet Condemn Russia,” Sputnik, October 23, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201610231046633284-us-allies-condemn-russia/>.

334 “White Helmets Behind ‘Reports’ About Hospitals in Rebel-Held Syrian Territory,” Sputnik, November 18, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201611181047591222-white-helmets-syria-schools-hospitals/>.

335 Vanessa Beeley, “Al-Qaeda Civil Defense Group White Helmets Rightfully Shut Out of Nobel Prize,” Sputnik, October 7, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201610071046110740-white-helmets-nobel-ambitions-commentary/>.

336 “West Sees Sputnik, RT Reports on Syria as ‘Obstacles’ to Russia’s Demonization,” Sputnik, December 16, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201612161048669418-west-obstacles-russia-demonization/>.

“**Anyone saw Al Jazeera fake character ‘Bana’? Anyone saw MI6’s ‘White Helmets’? Maybe they are in the green buses with al Qaeda to Idlib!”**

**Fares Shehabi, December 15, 2016**

Between August 13 and December 31, Sputnik ran twenty-seven articles that mentioned the White Helmets. Of those, twenty-four were negative, two were neutral, and just one—a preview of the Nobel Peace Prize contenders—was positive. When the Nobel prize was awarded to Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, Sputnik ran a Beeley article celebrating the fact that the White Helmets had lost out.<sup>337</sup> By contrast, when the group won the “Right Livelihood Awards,” dubbed the “Alternative Nobel,” in a prize widely reported by independent media,<sup>338</sup> Sputnik remained silent.<sup>339</sup>

Taken together, this suggests a deliberate policy of only reporting news and views that placed the White Helmets in a negative light.

The context of these various negative comments is also important. Müller’s quote is significant: “They cover the situation only from one side and comment on it in a corresponding way.” Cunningham and Beeley both labeled them as “propaganda”; so did Norwegian communist Pål Steigan, again

337 Beeley, “Al-Qaeda Civil Defense Group White Helmets Rightfully Shut Out of Nobel Prize”

338 For example, “Syria’s White Helmets win ‘alternative Nobel Prize,’” BBC News, September 22, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37442277>; “White Helmets among ‘Alternative Nobel Prize’ winners,” Al Jazeera English, September 22, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/white-helmets-alternative-nobel-prize-winners-160922082500686.html>.

339 Sputnik, search term “right livelihood,” January 16, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/search/?query=right+livelihood>.

interviewed by Sputnik,<sup>340</sup> Konashenkov accused them of “creating” reports about strikes on hospitals and schools.

In other words, all these attacks on the White Helmets were not related to their rescue activities, but to the way in which they documented and reported airstrikes and civilian suffering.

As this report, and many others, have demonstrated, such strikes did occur repeatedly. In the vast majority of cases, the White Helmets’ claims and video footage were corroborated by other sources, including news footage, security cameras, and satellite images.

Thus the White Helmets, formed as a response to the government and Russian bombing campaign, emerged as witnesses whose evidence could, when verified against other sources, be relied upon. Yet, they were consistently portrayed as a group whose evidence should be dismissed unregarded.

### **One family**

Similar treatment was meted out to a single family in the last months of the siege. This was the family of seven-year-old girl Bana al-Abed, who shot to international prominence when a series of tweets in her name began chronicling life under the siege.

In November and December, Bana was repeatedly cited in the Western media as an example of the suffering of civilians—especially after she engaged in a Twitter conversation<sup>341</sup> with Harry Potter author, J. K. Rowling, who has over nine million followers, and who sent her a collection of books.<sup>342</sup>

The response from the Russian and Syrian governments was harsh. On October 6, Assad was interviewed by Denmark’s TV2.<sup>343</sup> One of the questions focused on Bana’s tweets as an illustration of suffering. Assad’s response was to brush her aside:

*Q: At the moment, there’s a seven-year-old girl, her name is Bana al-Abed, from Aleppo. She’s Tweeting about her life in the eastern*

*part of Aleppo. She’s talking about the massive bombardment. She’s very scared, every time she wakes up and realizes, fortunately, she’s still alive. Do you trust her as an eyewitness?*

*A: You cannot build your political position or stand, let’s say, according to a video promoted by the terrorists or their supporters. It’s a game now, a game of propaganda, it’s a game of media.*

Shehabi was more aggressive, characterizing Bana as a “fake” while dismissing the White Helmets as belonging to MI6, and linking both to al-Qaeda—all in one tweet: “Anyone saw AlJazeera fake character ‘Bana’? Anyone saw MI6’s ‘White Helmets’? Maybe they are in the green buses with alQaeda to Idlib!”<sup>344</sup>

In parallel, a number of fake Twitter accounts sprang up, parodying Bana and claiming that she and her mother were jihadists and terrorists. These accounts were subsequently removed, but their attacks were chronicled by a number of reports, including in *New Statesman*<sup>345</sup> and *Bellingcat*.<sup>346</sup>

In December, Bana’s reputation came under wholesale attack in the Kremlin-run media. The primary source of the attack was a Syrian identified as Maytham al-Ashkar, and interviewed by RT, by whom he was introduced as a “journalist.”<sup>347</sup>

Al-Ashkar’s verdict on Bana echoed the attacks on the White Helmets: “I keep saying that this little girl is part of the Western information campaign against Syria.” He claimed, as particular grounds for suspicion, that Bana had a good internet connection, concluding that “We’re now sure that this account is run by more than one person and that these people are not just in Aleppo but outside the city.” He also claimed that he had offered to arrange safe passage out of the siege for Bana and her family, but that this had been refused.

Rather than challenging these claims during the program, RT’s anchor, Murad Gaziev, amplified

340 “Heroes or zeroes? Questions Raised About Upright Image of ‘White Helmets,’” Sputnik, December 22, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201612221048878911-white-helmets-syria-norway/>.

341 Bana al-Abed, tweet, November 24, 2016, [https://twitter.com/AlabedBana/status/801790481613127680?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/AlabedBana/status/801790481613127680?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).

342 J. K. Rowling, twitter account, [https://twitter.com/jk\\_rowling](https://twitter.com/jk_rowling).

343 “President al-Assad to Denmark’s TV 2: Moderate opposition is a myth,” SANA, transcript of TV2 interview, October 6, 2016, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=89763>.

344 Fares Shehabi, tweet, December 15, 2016, <https://twitter.com/ShehabiFares/status/809326717735149568>.

345 Amelia Tait, “Trolls are mocking a seven year old girl tweeting from Aleppo,” *New Statesman*, October 7, 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/world/2016/10/trolls-are-mocking-seven-year-old-girl-tweeting-besieged-aleppo>.

346 Nick Waters and Timmi Allen, “Finding Bana - Proving the Existence of a 7-year-old Girl in Eastern Aleppo,” *Bellingcat*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/14/bana-alabed-verification-using-open-source-information/>.

347 “MSM using children in Western information campaign against Syria - RT report,” RT, December 15, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/370365-aleppo-children-tools-war/>.



them, repeatedly saying that Bana “probably doesn’t understand” what she is tweeting about, claiming that her father had links to al-Qaeda, stating that, “Instead of fleeing, the parents chose to take Bana deeper into east Aleppo,” and adding, “Odd, all of that, but who cares? The media certainly doesn’t.”<sup>348</sup>

Al-Ashkar’s specific claims deserve analysis. According to a study conducted by Bellingcat,<sup>349</sup> the images shown in Bana’s posts match a single address in eastern Aleppo, debunking the claim that she was based outside the city. The claim that her parents were radical Islamists was based on fake social media accounts. The claim that her internet access was suspiciously regular was compared with known 3G and Wi-Fi services in the city, leading to the conclusion that “it appears there are multiple ways Bana and Fatemah could be gaining access to the internet.” Syrian journalist Marwan Hisham also rejected the thesis.<sup>350</sup>

However, al-Ashkar himself also deserves examination. In the following days, his views were repeated by a number of sources, including Sputnik and pro-Kremlin Russian-language site rusvesna.su. Sputnik, however, introduced him as an “activist,” rather than a journalist;<sup>351</sup> rusvensna.su introduced him as a “pro-government activist.”<sup>352</sup> Sputnik even included a screen grab of a twitter conversation purportedly between al-Ashkar and Fatemah Alabed, in which he explicitly said, “I am not a journalist.” When Fatemah answered, “But ur friend said u r a journalist,” the answer was, “It does not matter.”

The difference does matter, however. al-Ashkar was, by his own admission, not a journalist; a number of sources identified him as a pro-government activist. For a news outlet to interview him is legitimate, as long as he is correctly identified; however, any such interview should be balanced by some voice representing the opposing point of view. Neither RT nor Sputnik provided such a voice; in fact, RT’s interview, in particular,

reinforced al-Ashkar’s stance by claiming that Bana “probably did not understand” what was being tweeted from the account in her name.

Just as in the case of the White Helmets, therefore, the coverage provided by the Kremlin’s media appears to be a one-sided recitation of accusations from questionable sources, aimed at discrediting a key witness to Aleppo’s suffering.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Waters and Allen, Bellingcat, December 14, 2016, “[https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/14/bana-alabed-verification-using-open-source-information/Finding Bana.](https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/14/bana-alabed-verification-using-open-source-information/Finding%20Bana)”

<sup>350</sup> Marwan Hisham, tweet, November 29, 2016, <https://twitter.com/marwanhishampen/status/803610899760214016>.

<sup>351</sup> “Aleppo Twitter girl Bana is the ‘ultimate propaganda stunt’ - Syrian activist,” Sputnik, December 16, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201612161048599179-aleppo-bana-twitter/>.

<sup>352</sup> “«Девочка Бана из Алеппо» отказалась от эвакуации: сирийский активист проверил существование медиа-персонажа,” *Russkaya Vesna*, December 18, 2016, <http://rusvesna.su/news/1482063801>.

## Conclusion

This report has described in detail and context how the regime and its allies finally broke opposition-held Aleppo using siege, indiscriminate bombing, chemical weapons, incendiary bombs, and unrelenting misinformation. The findings are a sound rebuttal to the regime coalition's deliberate obfuscation and denials over what happened there. Telling Aleppo's story offers an in-depth view of some of the strategies being employed elsewhere around Syria, but even this is only the start of any effort to handle the Syria crisis and the role of Bashar al-Assad's allies in it. The battle of Aleppo is over, the battle for Syria not nearly so.

Aleppo's fall was an inflection point for the Syrian civil war, tipping the balance in favor of Iran, Russia, and the regime. It also coincided with dramatic political change in the United States in the election of President Donald Trump. With a new administration comes the possibility, and perhaps the necessity, of revising the many components of US policy in Syria including the war on ISIS; checking Iranian power; managing relations with Russia; balancing ties with Turkey and support for Kurdish proxies; addressing Arab allies' interests; and deciding the fate of Bashar al-Assad himself. Breaking Aleppo secured Assad's survival for now, but solved none of the other issues, and indeed further complicated some.

In the aftermath of Aleppo's destruction, the Trump Administration inherits a US position that is weaker than ever, in an even more shattered Syria. The city's prolonged destruction discredited US-allied opposition groups that had fought ISIS and were a potential counterterrorism partner. It also worsened population displacement and the refugee crisis, embarrassed and undermined the United States and its allies, continued the trend of violating humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions, and empowered Iran.

But while Aleppo itself may be broken, the United States is not without options to reverse these losses. Any successful strategy must center on population protection in areas at risk of getting similar treatment to that meted out in Aleppo. A successful ceasefire led and enforced by the United States and willing partners would allow Syrian allies currently targeted by Iran and Assad to take the fight to extremists, ensure the flow of aid to all areas, stop the ongoing forced displacement of Syrians, and boost the local credibility of Syrian forces allied with the United States. A US-backed ceasefire would firmly check

Iranian and Hezbollah expansionism. It would also affirm the United States' commitment to regional allies calling for an assertive US posture against Iran.

A credible ceasefire in Syria does not require occupying the country, or engaging in nation building. What it does require is the imposition of costs on violators (overwhelmingly the regime, Iran, and its proxies) whether through direct kinetic action, robust support for local allies on the ground, or any other effective measures in the policy toolkit. Breaking Aleppo did not end the war or its serious challenges to US interests. Dark as it is, however, it is also a valuable call to action, a hard lesson in the cost of inaction, and a case study in a new and devastating combination of tactics honed by the United States' adversaries. Aleppo's catastrophe must inform a US strategy that is both bolder and wiser than that which allowed it to happen.

# Appendix

## The Siege of Aleppo: Context and Timeline

The siege of Aleppo did not occur in isolation: it was part of a nationwide series of struggles between the Assad government and opposition groups of all shades, from moderate groups to extremist Islamists such as ISIS and the Nusra Front. That, in turn, was part of the broader upheaval sweeping the Arabic world from 2011 onward, with uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in January and February 2011.

The Syrian conflict can be considered to have begun on March 15, 2011, with the launch of protests against the Assad government across the country. The conflict continues to this day. The following timeline chronicles the key events in Aleppo.

2011

Protests begin across Syria, reaching Aleppo in April.

2012

### 3 MAY

Protests take place at Aleppo University. The security services crack down on the protests, and four students are killed.

### 17 MAY

Large protests at the university are overrun by security services and pro-government crowds.

### 19 JULY

The first battles break out in Aleppo city, with gunfights in Salah al-Din district.

### 22 JULY

The armed uprising reaches Aleppo in earnest, when between 6-7,000 fighters from 18 battalions, mostly from the countryside of Aleppo province, take up arms against the government in the city.

2013

### 1 JANUARY

Flights from Aleppo international airport are suspended due to the conflict.

### 29 JANUARY

110 bodies are discovered in the Aleppo river, apparently having floated

downstream. They appear to have been executed; most had gone missing at government checkpoints.

### FEBRUARY

Opposition forces capture the Umayyad mosque in Aleppo.

### JULY-OCTOBER

Opposition forces enforce a siege of government-held west Aleppo<sup>353</sup>

### 15 DECEMBER

The first barrel-bomb attack on Aleppo is reported.

2014

### 4 JANUARY

The fitna begins. It is a battle between the opposition forces and ISIS, to expel ISIS from Aleppo. ISIS retreats from Idlib and Aleppo and consolidates in the east of the country. A front line between the opposition forces and ISIS was held through the Aleppo countryside from this point on.

### 18 JANUARY ONWARD

Barrel-bomb attacks on Aleppo continue with multiple attacks each month throughout 2014 and 2015.

### 8 MAY

Opposition forces tunnel under the Old City and plant a bomb underneath the Carlton hotel, a base for government forces.

2015

A war of attrition continues throughout 2015, with the city of Aleppo split in two.

Barrel bombings continue throughout the year, and many attacks occur every month.

### SEPTEMBER

Russian forces join the conflict in earnest.

2016

### 27 FEBRUARY

A nationwide cessation of hostilities is announced and the ceasefire begins across Syria.

353 Edward Dark, "Aleppo Starves Under Siege," Al-Monitor, July 15, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/aleppo-syria-rebel-siege-assad.html>.

**14 MARCH**

Putin announces his troops are pulling out of Syria. They do not.

**10 APRIL**

After a six-week pause during the cessation of hostilities, barrel-bomb attacks begin again in Aleppo.

**25 JUNE**

Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and allies begin the “north Aleppo” offensive to take Castello Road, the last supply line into east Aleppo.

**6 JULY**

A seventy-two-hour “period of calm” for the celebration of Eid is implemented, but fighting in the Castello Road area continues throughout as the government continues its offensive.

**27 JULY**

SAA and allies take back control of the Castello Road, cutting access to opposition-held east Aleppo.

**6 AUGUST**

Opposition forces mount an offensive and take control of Ramousah Road, creating a tentative access road into east Aleppo, though it is heavily shelled and besieges government-held west Aleppo in the process.

**26 AUGUST**

Darayya (Damascus) is evacuated after a “truce” agreement is agreed between local representatives and the government.

**4 SEPTEMBER**

SAA and their allies take back control of Ramousah Road, besieging east Aleppo.

**12 SEPTEMBER**

A nationwide ceasefire, negotiated between Russia and the US, begins for an initial period of forty-eight hours.

**14 SEPTEMBER**

The nationwide ceasefire is extended for another forty-eight hours.

**17 SEPTEMBER**

US jets hit SAA forces near Deir Ezzour; they announce the strike was accidental.

**19 SEPTEMBER**

Russian or Syrian jets hit an 18-truck aid convoy in the west Aleppo countryside, signaling the end of the ceasefire.

**22 SEPTEMBER**

SAA and allied forces launch an offensive to take back Aleppo, and retake 15–20 percent of the opposition-held part of Aleppo.

**28 OCTOBER**

Opposition forces launch the “Battle of the Hero Martyr Abu Omar Saraqib” in west Aleppo, trying to break the siege, but fail.

**26/27 NOVEMBER**—Syrian forces take control of Hanano suburb in east Aleppo.

**5 DECEMBER**

Russia and China veto a UNSC resolution calling for a humanitarian pause in Aleppo.

**13 DECEMBER**

Only 5 percent of the original territory the opposition occupied in the city remains in their hands, and a ceasefire is announced.

**14 DECEMBER**

An evacuation is set to begin, but the buses are halted at the final checkpoint by an Iranian militia.

**15 DECEMBER**

The evacuation begins.

**16 DECEMBER**

The evacuation continues but is stalled when government-aligned militias force evacuees off the bus and send them back to east Aleppo. A new evacuation deal is negotiated, incorporating evacuations from Foua and Kafraya.

**17 DECEMBER**

Evacuation buses near Foua and Kafraya are burned by JFS, halting reconfigured evacuation deal.

**18 DECEMBER**

Evacuation recommences.

**19 DECEMBER**

UNSC agrees to send UN observers to oversee the evacuation of Aleppo.

**23 DECEMBER**

ICRC announces the evacuation of Aleppo complete, while the Syrian government declares victory.

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