

Humanitarian Aid and the Battle of Aleppo

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News

After an extremely brutal military campaign that lasted less than a month, the last Syrian rebel-held opposition enclave in Eastern Aleppo was handed over by mid-December 2016 to an international coalition of armed forces supporting the Assad-regime. It marked the end of a four-and-a-half year struggle for control over the city that was once one of Syria's major commercial hubs.¹ The military campaign was composed of intense carpet bombing of military and civilian targets paired by an elaborate siege, starving and forcing residents into a truce with their subsequent transfer.

This contribution explores to what degree the military campaign and the instrumentalization of humanitarian action in Aleppo have become mutually dependent components of warfare by the Assad-regime coalition in Syria.

Summary

Since rebels took over half of Aleppo in November 2012, it constituted one of their major strongholds in Syria for four years despite frequently shifting frontlines and the Islamic State emerging as a powerful enemy. Four years later, in November 2016, a coalition of armed forces supporting the Assad-regime launched an extremely brutal military assault targeting civilians as well as armed rebels. By mid-December the latter, lacking internal cohesion and pressured by the ailing population, ceded nearly all of their territory in Aleppo except for a besieged pocket in the eastern part. The final handover was one of the most complex deals negotiated for Syria and consisted of an unprecedented forced transfer of tens of thousands of residents and armed rebels.

Key Words

Syria, Aleppo, Syrian war, Middle East, Assad, UN, humanitarian aid

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Analysis:

1. Military Developments in Aleppo since 2012

Aleppo was a late-comer to the Syrian uprising of 2011. Gunfights between rebels and the regime did not erupt until early 2012. By July 2012 local armed groups unified under the name of Tauhid Brigade,¹ which became one of the first rebel coalitions in Syria to control territory. By November 2012, it had surrounded Assad-regime forces and ended up dividing the city in half, with the opposition controlling the east and the regime the west. Neither side was able to break the deadlock,² even though foreign parties had turned the conflict increasingly into a proxy war along confessional lines.

Since the end of 2013, Assad-regime helicopters indiscriminately dropped large amounts of barrel bombs on rebel-held areas causing extensive destruction of vital infrastructure and causing immense suffering. From late 2015 onwards, they synchronized their bombings with the Russian airforce.

In March 2016 Amnesty International strongly criticized the Assad-regime's "deliberate targeting of health facilities in flagrant violation of international humanitarian law", in addition to the targeting of water and electricity as part of their military strategy.³ By June 2016 Russia intensified aerial bombardments in the wider Aleppo region. Iranian military advisors, Shiite foreign fighters from the Lebanese Hizballah and Syrian Special Forces were sent as reinforcements for regular Assad-regime troops.⁴

2. The Battle and the Fall of Aleppo

On 15 November 2016, the Assad-regime coalition launched another assault encircling rebel-held densely populated sectors in Eastern Aleppo. Around 100,000 trapped residents were submitted to intensive ceaseless bombardment by Russian Air-Force with extensive use of cluster munition and barrel bombs for twelve days.⁵ Among the

¹ Aron Lund, *Fighting in Aleppo, Resisting in Geneva*. Washington DC: Carnegie, 2.1.2014; online: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54064?lang=en> (retrieved 21.12.2016)

² "Profile: Aleppo, Syria's second city," *BBC* 28.11.2016; online: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18957096> (retrieved 20.12.2016)

³ Amnesty International, *Syrian and Russian Forces Targeting Hospitals as a Strategy of War*. Press Release 3 March 2016; online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2016/03/syrian-and-russian-forces-targeting-hospitals-as-a-strategy-of-war/> (retrieved 22.12.2016)

⁴ Aron Lund, *Assad Advanced in Damascus and Aleppo*. Washington DC: Carnegie 11.7.2016; online: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64055> (retrieved 21.12.2016)

⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Russia/Syria: Extensive Recent Use of Cluster Munitions*. 20.12.2015; online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/28/russia/syria-widespread-new-cluster-munition-use> (retrieved 21.12.2016)

targets were hospitals, patients, and medical staff.⁶ By 27 November 2016, a major ground offensive followed coordinated by a joint command center with senior Iranian, Syrian, Russian, and Lebanese Hizballah military personnel.⁷ On the rebel side a spate of inter-factional fighting had ruptured any hope of a unified defense of Aleppo.⁸ In addition, thousands of rebel forces were tied up with the Turkish military intervention northeast of Aleppo. By 12 December 2016 rebel-held territory was reduced to a small pocket in Eastern Aleppo with many rumors circulating about betrayals and secret deals among rebels.⁹

The next day, on 13 December, Russia and Turkey with Iran, Syrian militias and the Assad-regime, agreed on one of the most complex deals ever negotiated in the Syria War consisting of the hand-over of the enclave by the transfer of all rebels with light weapons and civilians to other territories.¹⁰ By 15 December the transfer started accompanied by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) under chaotic circumstances through a small corridor. In the process allegations of killings by Shiite militias emerged, claiming that Iran had undermined the deal without consulting Russia.¹¹ It took hours of negotiations, which left thousands of people at the collection point in freezing temperatures without food, shelter and sanitary infrastructure. During the night of 15 December the transfer of these completely exhausted residents continued. It was stopped again on the following day with allegations of one person killed by Shiite militias tied to Iran emerging.¹²

⁶ So far 700 medical staff were killed. See Ben Taub, "The Shadow Doctors," *The New Yorker* 27.6.2016; online: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/06/27/syrias-war-on-doctors> (retrieved 20.12.2016)

⁷ Amir Toumaj, "Array of Pro-Syrian Government Forces Advances in Aleppo," *Long War Journal* 9.12.2016; online: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/array-of-pro-syrian-government-forces-advance-in-aleppo.php> (retrieved 20.12.2016)

⁸ Charles Lister, "Aleppo Has Fallen, Part 2," *Huffington Post* 20.12.2016; online: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/58592a35e4b0d5f48e165292?timestamp=1482238712118> (retrieved 19.12.2016)

⁹ Aron Lund, *A Turning Point in Aleppo*. Washington DC: Carnegie, 1.12.2016, online: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/66314> (retrieved 20.12.2016)

¹⁰ The Guardian, *The Battle for Eastern Aleppo in Maps: How Rebel Territory is Shrinking*. Last update 14.12.2016; online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2016/nov/30/battle-eastern-aleppo-maps-rebel-territory-shrinking> (retrieved 21.12.2016)

¹¹ "Aleppo Evacuation Halted Amid Confusion and Concerns about Killings," *New York Times* 16.12.2016; online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/world/middleeast/aleppo-evacuation-assad-syria.html> (retrieved 21.12.2016); "Syria Negotiators Race to Salvage Aleppo Evacuation Deal," *Guardian* 17.12.2016; online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/16/aleppo-evacuation-suspended-as-blasts-heard-at-departure-point> (retrieved 20.12.2016)

¹² Aljazeera Arabic, *The Week that Shocked Humanity*, 19.12.2016; online: <http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/events/2016/12/20/الأسبوع-الذي-صدم-الإنسانية-حلب> (retrieved 22.12.2016)

Figures of the total population transfer vary. One source mentioned 93,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs): 40,000 transferred to Idlib, 37,000 to regime-controlled Western areas of Aleppo, 10,000 to Aleppo's Northern Kurdish-majority neighborhood of Shaikh Maqsud, 6,000 to the south.¹³ According to the UN the number was as high as 111,000 IDPs, with 36,000 transferred to rebel-held areas and 75,000 to regime-held areas.¹⁴

3. The Instrumentalization of Humanitarian Aid by the Assad-Regime

Many of the battle fronts in Syria go through urban centers in densely populated urban areas. There, carpet-bombing, besieging, starving and evicting residents have become efficient tools of warfare of the Assad-regime coalition strategy, totally ignoring International Humanitarian Law. Its "siege and starve" and subsequently "evict or die" campaign target civilian population and pressure rebels to submit to truce agreements,¹⁵ which subsequently lead to forced population transfers. Until today almost one million people in Syria live in besieged areas without access to clean water, electricity, food or proper medical treatment. The weakest are dying of starvation - live-streamed on social media -, while another 1.4 million are at risk of coming under siege.¹⁶ The siege of Aleppo was the longest and most publicized in modern warfare leaving an estimated 31,053 people dead.¹⁷

International humanitarian organizations based in Damascus hardly ever get access to these besieged areas, but they can operate in regime-controlled areas. They have been subjected to ongoing criticism for having entangled themselves in an elaborate bureaucratic labyrinth defined by the Assad-regime including requesting access from

¹³ Rulian Röpke (@JulianRoepke) in a tweet on 23.12.2016 (retrieved 23.12.2016)

¹⁴ OCHA Syria, *Situation Report No. 11*, 27.12.2016; online: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sitrep_no.10_Aleppo_27%20December.pdf (retrieved 28.12.2016)

¹⁵ Emma Beals, "Assad's Savage Aleppo Strategy: Evacuate or Die," *The Daily Beast* 11.4.2016; online: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/11/04/assad-s-savage-aleppo-strategy-evacuate-or-die.html> (retrieved 20.12.2016); Physicians for Human Rights, Syrian American Medical Society, *Madaya: Portrait of a Syrian Town Under Siege*. July 2016, online: <https://www.sams-usa.net/reports/madaya-portrait-of-a-syrian-town-under-siege/> (retrieved 17.12.2016)

¹⁶ "Syria conflict: Almost one million living under siege – UN," *BBC* 21 November 2016; online: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38056872> (retrieved 22.12.2016).

¹⁷ Violations Documentation Center in Syria, *Aleppo (2012-16)*, VDC; online: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1382274490#.WFq-GbGX-8U> (retrieved 18.12.2016).

militia leaders close to Assad, who have turned sieges into their most lucrative business by taking enormous bribes.¹⁸

Addressing the issue, the United Nations Security Council in February 2014 unanimously adopted the Resolution 2139 on Syria requesting rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for UN humanitarian agencies. Five months later, UNSC passed Resolution 2165, which both reaffirmed 2139 and authorized humanitarian organizations to operate not only across conflict lines but also border crossings, providing a vital legal framework for cross-border humanitarian operations from Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey into Syria.

Even though an enforcement mechanism was not foreseen by the UNSC, international humanitarian organizations based in Damascus could have exploited the legal framework put at their disposition by even threatening to ultimately withdraw from Damascus, if access to starving population was not given. Instead they continued to operate within a state-centric approach and sovereignty-oriented approach recognizing the Assad-regime and its many militias as the sole sovereign within what once used to be Syria's national boundaries.

In order to set up an infrastructure and work from and in regime-controlled areas, humanitarian actors need permission from the Assad-regime, which so far was only given to those particularly cooperative. Their management of human resources and humanitarian aid is not only influenced but totally controlled by the regime. Elaborate secret-service controlled visa and procurement procedures define the nature of human resources and humanitarian aid. They are aimed at entangling international humanitarian actors in a labyrinth of Assad-regime bureaucracy. In addition, the World Food Programme (WFP), the largest UN operational agency funding and organizing food distribution inside Syria, as well as the ICRC, depend on the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and 27 regime-approved NGOs to reach areas that they cannot access owing to security concern and restrictions most often placed on them by the Syrian regime.¹⁹ The international Damascus-based humanitarian industry's anticipatory obedience and its conviction that it did not have "a role to play in the countering of abusive or violent behavior even when political and military strategies and tactics pose the biggest threat

¹⁸ Annie Sparrow, "Aiding Disaster," *Foreign Affairs* 1.2.2016; online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-02-01/aiding-disaster> (retrieved 3.2.2016); Annie Sparrow, "The UN's Role in the Sieges in Syria," *Foreign Affairs* 29.3.2016; online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-03-29/uns-role-sieges-syria> (retrieved 17.12.2016); Physicians for Human Rights, Syrian American Medical Society, *Madaya: Portrait of a Syrian Town Under Siege*. July 2016, p. 7; online: <https://www.sams-usa.net/reports/madaya-portrait-of-a-syrian-town-under-siege/> (retrieved 17.12.2016)

¹⁹ José Ciro Martínez, Brent Eng, "The Unintended Consequences of Emergency Food Aid," *International Affairs* 92, 1, 2016, p. 158.

to life”,²⁰ contributed to emboldening the Assad-regime coalition to instrumentalize humanitarian aid further. In September 2016, more than seventy aid groups working mainly in rebel-held areas in Syria, including the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) and the Syrian Civil Defense, withdrew from UN OCHA's aid campaign, alleging that the UN and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent were allowing the Syrian regime to interfere with aid.²¹

4. What Comes Next?

In this asymmetric proxy war, the Assad-regime coalition has very successfully combined extremely brutal military operations totally disregarding International Humanitarian Law with carpet bombings of entire neighborhoods. Its instrumentalization of humanitarian aid through the “siege-starve” and “evacuate-die” campaign has turned aid into an efficient tool of warfare to put pressure on rebels via the ailing civilian population living in the areas under their control.

The images emerging from the fallen city of Aleppo send a strong signal to the remaining rebel-held territories in Syria about the high humanitarian price of continued resistance. Even though the current situation leaves the Syrian opposition forces with no platform to reverse the course of the war, a negotiated solution to the war seems difficult to implement on the ground. The Russia-Turkey brokered Syrian cease-fire, the third this year, started on 29 December was signed by only seven rebel groups excluding Ahrar al-Sham.²² The non-jihadist opposition, while more flexible, insists on minimum demands of a Syria without Assad, making negotiations a non-starter. Since none of those warring parties will fundamentally change its position, a negotiated resolution to the conflict looks highly unlikely.²³ It is also unclear if the Assad-regime still has any say on matters inside Syria.

²⁰ Norah Niland, Riccardo Polastro, Antonio Donini, Amra Lee, *Independent Whole of System Review of Protection in the Context of Humanitarian Action*. Norwegian Refugee Council, May 2015, p. 11.

²¹ Emma Beals, Nick Hopkins, "Aid groups suspend cooperation with UN in Syria because of Assad 'influence,'" *The Guardian* 8.9.2016; online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/08/aid-groups-un-syria-concern-assad-united-nations> (retrieved 20 September 2016).

²² Ben Hubbard, "Syrian Cease-Fire Appears to Be Holding, for Now," *New York Times* 30.12.2016, online: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/world/middleeast/syria-cease-fire.html?_r=0 (retrieved 30.12.2016)

²³ Sam Heller, *A Syria Policy for Trump's America*. The Century Foundation, 9.12.2016; online: <https://tcf.org/content/report/syria-policy-trumps-america/> (retrieved 20.12.2016)