

Aleppo Is Celebrating, Free From Terrorists

Interview with Medical Doctor

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“The people of Aleppo East are experiencing moments of joy, liberated from the terrorists who used civilians as human shields.” The sound of these words has a different score than what we were used to hearing in the West.

Many media have described the liberation of the Syrian city by government troops as if it were a plague, while on the ground, despite inevitable difficulties and episodes of ferocity, the population lived those moments as if a nightmare had ended.

Dr. Nabil Antaki confirms this. Born in '41, gastroenterologist, when the war has also invested Aleppo, was urged to flee for his life. But he chose to stay. He remained in Mouhafaz, his neighborhood, located in the western part of the city, because “people during the conflict were more than ever in need of care.”

Faithful to the Hippocratic Oath, he has done his job during all stages of this cruel conflict in Aleppo. And now that the sound of mortars has finally quieted, Dr. Antaki tells ZENIT his experience:

ZENIT: Dr. Antaki, today in the West there is the “Aleppo Day”, to express solidarity for the population of this Syrian city. What’s the situation? Many people have lost homes during the conflict...

Dr. Antaki: The situation of Aleppo is now much better that it was in the last 4 years. It is now almost liberated from the rebels-terrorists. The inhabitants of Aleppo have a feeling of safety, there has been no mortar shelling in the last few days as it was daily during the last four years. The inhabitants of East Aleppo are free now from the terrorists who used them as human shields.

Yes, thousands of families lost their homes, most of them four years ago, when the rebels invaded some neighborhoods in the East of Aleppo in July 2012. Half a million persons at that time left their home and came to the West neighborhoods under the Syrian government control. During the last weeks with the liberation of the East side, thousands lost their home. 80% of the population of Aleppo nowadays are IDPs (Internal Displaced persons).

ZENIT: You are a doctor. What’s, if you will, the ‘health’ situation in Aleppo?

Dr. Antaki: It’s not bad actually, better than before. It’s acceptable, not very good, but acceptable.

ZENIT: In the West, much emphasis have had the liberation of Aleppo, in particular for

civilians trapped in the east of the city. Why it was difficult to carry out the evacuation?

Dr. Antaki: The evacuation was difficult for two reasons: The first one is that some of the rebels refused the evacuation's agreement and shot the civilians who wanted to leave. They wanted to keep the civilians as human shields. The second reason is that, in the evacuation agreement, the rebels agreed to release the blockade on two besieged Shiite villages in the province of Idlib to permit the evacuation of injured and sick people. But, at the beginning, they didn't fulfill their commitment.

ZENIT: The situation you describe is different to that which we heard in the West. Do you believe that the information about Aleppo conveyed by the Western media is not accurate?

Dr. Antaki: For sure, they are not accurate and very often not true. They exaggerated and amplified the airstrikes, the shelling and the suffering of the people of East Aleppo and they almost never reported the suffering of the inhabitants of West Aleppo, the daily mortar shelling on their neighborhoods with many casualties every day. They didn't report the interruption of water supply to a city of 1.5 million persons by the rebels.

ZENIT: In your opinion, is there misinformation about Syria?

Dr. Antaki: Since the beginning of the war, the western media were not neutral nor objective. They didn't have reporters on the ground. Their main sources of information are the Syrian observatory for human rights and the social media like Facebook. Concerning the SOHR, it is a well-known agency created before the start of the war, based in London, directed by one man with one objective: Misinformation. The second source of information are the videos and pictures published on FB and Twitter by activists very close to the terrorists. Many of them are fake, some videos were taken in other countries during other tragedies. Unfortunately, most of the western media rely only on these sources. They were manipulated and they misinformed the public opinion.

ZENIT: Who are the opponents of Assad? Are they all Islamic terrorists?

Dr. Antaki: Almost all the armed groups on the ground are Islamic terrorists. They are not only opponents to Assad but also to the Syrian state. They are not democrats. They want an Islamic state. The non-armed opponents are mainly people who have left Syria many years ago, migrate to Europe, have no more links with Syria. Few are idealistic.

ZENIT: Do you think Assad has the support of the majority?

Dr. Antaki: I think so because the majority of the Syrian people discovered few weeks after the beginning of the war that what is happening is not a revolution aiming to bring more democracy, more respect of human rights. The majority of Syrians knew that the majority of the armed opponents to Assad were terrorists, jihadists (90,000 foreigners) who wanted to destroy our country and install an Islamic state.

ZENIT: You are a Christian. How has the condition of the Christian community in Syria changed since the war began?

Dr. Antaki: Syria is a secular state. Our status before the war and during the war has not changed. Like our Muslim fellows, the Christians in Syria consider themselves as Syrians before claiming their Christian identity. What has changed is an incredible decrease of the Christians in Aleppo. Three quarters left the country. This constitutes a big suffering because

we were the first Christians on the earth and Syria was the cradle of Christianity.

ZENIT: Which political future you see for Syria?

Dr. Antaki: After the neutralization of the terrorists, the future of Syria must be determined by the Syrian people without any foreign interference.

ZENIT: What will Christmas mean for the population of Aleppo?

Dr. Antaki: For the first time in five years, Christmas will be celebrated with joy in Aleppo. The feeling of relief of the Christian, now that Aleppo is free from terrorists, is very important. They made a quick clean of their destroyed cathedrals where Christmas celebrations and Mass will be held. They decorate the churches and the streets and are, for the first time in five years, relatively happy.

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