

“Islamic State” Terrorists and Syria’s Humanitarian Crisis. The City of Aleppo

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25/07/2015 ~ Report from an Aleppo resident.

Travelling to the other part of the city

A friendly taxi driver we know wanted to visit his house on the other side of Aleppo. An area where the terrorists and the so-called “rebels” are in control. He had heard that the Syrian jets attacked the area and bombed a place close to his house. He went in the Eid vacation (17-19th of July) with his wife for 2 days. A trip that used to take 20-30 min from one part of the city to another, took something like 7 hours, because they had to go around 25 miles away from the city to make a U-turn and come back from another area. They had to pass through many villages under terrorist control, till they reached the eastern part of Aleppo city, and finally their home.

They went in a bus, and he didn’t take his taxi car as terrorists might take it from him by force. He told me that the trip costs them \$70-\$100 over 2 days (transport, eating ...etc), he was complaining because it’s a lot of money for him (it’s equal to 100-150 paid trips he could make with his taxi, he might need a week of hard working to compensate that money). They took most of their clothes that were still there, thanks to their only 2 neighbours who are still living in the building who protected their apartment. The remaining apartments and houses in the quarter had been robbed, broken into or damaged because they had been converted into nesting places for the terrorists.



Many good people are still going from one part of the city to the other. Many people didn't deserve to be kicked out from their homes, and it wasn't their choice to stay in one place or become refugees in another place. Visiting each side is still possible for people, but it's dangerous, and I won't do it no matter what.

Citadel

My understanding is that on the 13th/14th of July, the Syrian army - who are occupying the very strategic acropolis hill of the ancient citadel of Aleppo in the middle of the ancient walled city, which is under the terrorists' control - knew about a new tunnel that the terrorists were digging and filling up with explosives, very close to the citadel's borders. The Army made a counter attack and forced the terrorists out of the tunnel in a hurry. Unfortunately the terrorists detonated these explosives before they left, and that explosion was enough to destroy part of the ramparts of the citadel. I can't help thinking if the Army hadn't discovered this tunnel and if terrorists had drilled a longer and deeper tunnel, and armed it with 10 times more explosives, maybe the whole citadel would have collapsed.

I saw some new and clear digital images from the citadel to the old city via a friend of my friend, however these photos are dated a couple of days prior to this attack. The few buildings around the citadel, had been damaged totally or partially.

Khosrawiyya/Chusruviyya mosque, the first and oldest Ottoman mosque in Aleppo (built in 1544) had disappeared. Same for Carlton Hotel which occupied a century old building as a multi million investment. The building of the municipality or where the Mayor used to work (~75 years old?, 12 stories?) had been 80% destroyed. A Memluk or Ayyoubid period small mosque and religious school (~700-1,000 years old) had disappeared apart from its gate and its little minaret above the gate.

The Traditional/Turkish Bath of Yalbogha al-Nasseri (~700-800 years old) is still there, but some of its big domes have collapsed. Another century-old building - that I remember sitting

in for 3-4 hours 15 years ago, manually copying some information to use in my graduation project – had been damaged so badly, especially its beautiful double mirrored spiral stairs at the entrance, they have disappeared without a trace.

Those buildings have all been destroyed by the same terrorist techniques, within the last 4 years of war in the city: digging tunnels, or using ancient existing networks of tunnels under the whole old city of Aleppo. Filling them up with explosives, to bomb everything above them. While these explosions serve as a distraction, terrorist troops will attack another goal, mostly the citadel where the Syrian army is encamped. They failed so far to control it, but damage to the citadel is extensive.

Although what I mentioned above is horrible, and I know about other famous areas (markets, bazaars, mosques and churches) that have been sabotaged or destroyed; I was pleased that way more areas and buildings of the old city are still there, as I know them. Maybe they are not that famous or masterpieces, but they are still there untouched and intact.

The war targeted the symbols of Aleppo (and the same strategy in all Syria, of course). The bazaar of Aleppo, which was there since the 4th century AD, since the Hellenistic era, is a symbol, and it had been burned totally (it took a week of continuous burning, and the burning smell reached every corner in the city).

The Great / Umayyad Mosque is a symbol, it's almost 1000-year-old minaret had been destroyed by dynamite, and its preaching stage has been dismantled (most of it taken to Turkey), several walls and sides of it had been completely destroyed, and they turned the mosque into its original and oldest land use: an Agora (Plaza) in the Hellenistic era. A similar fate for all the other lost places and monuments.

The last symbol left of Aleppo, is the most famous one: the Citadel. I can see part of it from our balcony, but I can see it more clearly from the roof of the building. It's still there, resisting the terrorists and their funding states. It has been badly injured, but it's still there, dominating the city skyline. It's where they found the Storm God's Temple (~2nd millennium BC) few years ago. It withstood many invaders, including the Mongols and Crusaders. It has been damaged severely several times through history, but it has been rebuilt over and over again, as an immortal symbol to the inhabitants of one of the oldest living cities in history. I just pray I don't live to witness its total destruction as I have seen happen to many of the surrounding buildings.



Socially

Aleppo city has shrunk to a fifth of its original size, and became so crowded with refugees that fled their areas after they fell into terrorist hands. I walk everyday in the city. I see children and girls without limbs because of a mortar over here or shrapnel over there that hit them randomly and caused them a terrible wounds and horrific memories that will never leave them. The girl who lost one leg is standing on her good leg and selling bread, while the little boy who lost one arm is selling chewing gum. Those are the “injured” people who come in the news, just numbers in one line of a report, after each attack from the terrorists. “Injured” doesn’t mean scratched or having a bleeding finger; it means someone lost his eyes or her limbs.

At nights, some areas in Ramadan were still playing live music while audiences smoke their sheesha and have cold beverages. I admired that the spirit of musicians is still over there, resisting all the harsh situation of the crisis.

On the other side, and because of the war and lack of income, many females are selling themselves for money. Prostitution has become so normal in Aleppo, and it has affected all

social classes and levels.

The daily talk of every youth is emigration and leaving the city. Everyone wants to leave to Europe, mostly to Sweden, which accepted a lot of Syrian refugees so far. The usual trip starts from Syria to Turkey, then they go in boats to Greece, and that is a very dangerous trip because many have lost their lives and have drowned. Once they reach Greece, they go into a long process, and end up either in Germany or Sweden. There is a new “market” for smuggling people to Europe in such illegal ways. Everyone is believing the myths that once they reach Sweden, the government will give them free houses and 500 Euros per person.

I keep telling them that this amount of money might be a fortune in Syria, but it’s not over there, and life is not that cheap. However, they just want to leave and work doing anything over there, because they are worried about their children’s future and safety.

What happened in Syria in general, and Aleppo in particular, is something like a great “shock” which people are still unable to believe. Between 2006-2011; Turkey, Qatar, Saudi and mostly all Europe and the U.S. opened all their relations with Syria and funded many international investments in the country. History will eventually reveal if that act was a trap or a bribe or a bad luck, to shower the people with unprecedented wealth, and take it all back within few years, replacing that shower with mortars and shelling .

All of a sudden, malls started to spring up in big cities like mushrooms. Brand new cars and vehicles were commonplace to see in the streets, including Porsches, Lamborghini, and Ferraris. In my neighborhood and other areas, many new buildings replaced old ones. Many friends I know told me that they were paying \$20,000 - \$25,000 as salaries for workers in factories and contractor firms per week! Work was amazing, everyone was happy, a lot of money, wealth, and marriages and having new kids became more than normal.

My aunt’s husband, who is an architect living in Germany, came back to Syria to work on an architectural project for a Dutch firm in Damascus. All of Syria and its people were taken to the peak of wealth, and then it all collapsed as if an earthquake had destroyed everything in its path. Unbelievable tragedy.

My brother saw his once rich and wealthy friend selling small items (plastics, gums, ..etc) on the street in front of a mosque, and he didn’t believe it. He told him that he lost everything, and he has a family to feed and to put food on the table. Turkey dismantled and stole his factory, his land had been burned, his properties had been either damaged or stolen, and he was bankrupt in no time at all.

Each day, there is new story, real tragedies, that reach my ears and heart. All of a sudden, everything ended.

Factories that cost \$8 million and more had been stolen by Turkey, and the owner had a stroke and died because of such losses.

The worker who used to have his salary from an architect or an investor, became a leader of “rebellion” battalion, and now he can rape unlimited ladies, and have millions of US dollars, and came back with his militia to destroy the work of this architect or that investor, out of God knows what... Rage? Seeking lust and more wealth in shorter way? Revenge?

Another person who I met yesterday, told me that he had been kidnapped and they asked for a huge ransom that bankrupt him after he had been so wealthy. He lost his factories as

well, and trade, and now he is suffering from diabetes and blood pressure and heart troubles.

You'll see it in each person's eyes: a type of sparkle with a slight smile, while remembering how they were so rich and wealthy, travelling to Europe 3 times a year for pleasure and tourism, having the best life ever over here in Syria, and having great dreams for their children and potential promises for building the country and modernizing their cities.... Then, all of a sudden, everything disappeared.

One old friend told me that his youngest 2 girls, who are 4 and 6 years old, didn't know what sea and mountains looked like until a couple of months ago when he managed to take his family for a trip to the coast and mountains. They didn't leave their house for 4-5 years, and they only saw mountains and sea through cartoons or illustrated tales.

A neighbour's girl came back to her parents with her 3 teenage girls after the terrorists occupied her house in another "infected" area in the city. They looted whatever they could, and didn't leave before looting and sacking the whole house . Sabotaging could entail burning or breaking furniture, but when someone sees all his rooms and beloved furniture and family pictures stained with human faeces, that is so disgusting and humiliating. I actually heard such stories when I was still in outside Syria, but I thought it was an individual act, not a common strategy in that sector of the city, to humiliate people and push them to leave their areas. So, their daughter sold her apartment and didn't want to see it again, and went back to her parents'. Others became refugees. Others sold their daughters to the prostitution market... stories and stories, that break my heart, and make me wonder how all that happened, and who planned for it.

I'll leave it there. Thanks to everyone. Have a great weekend."

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