

**Special Report on the  
Evacuation of Civilians  
from East Aleppo  
6/January/2017**

**Violations Documentation Center  
in Syria**



مركز توثيق الانتهاكات في سوريا  
Violations Documentation Center in Syria



Aerial picture for evacuation convoys from besieged east Aleppo towards west Aleppo

By: Hasan Qatan 15-12-2016

### **Report Methodology:**

The report was developed through witnesses' accounts of VDC data collectors, locals in Aleppo, activists and aid workers in addition to those working in medical points and field hospitals.

### **Preface:**

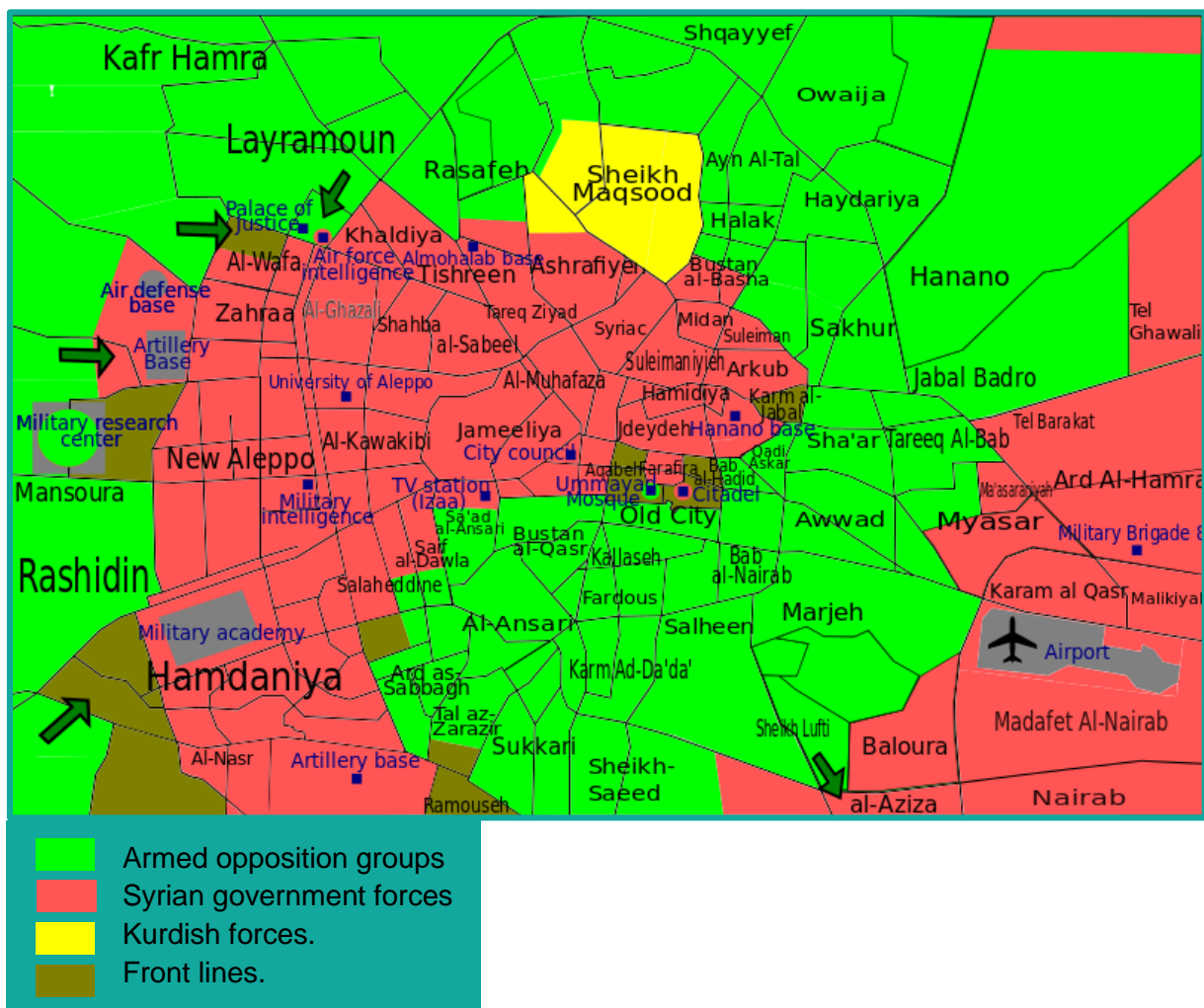
Aleppo is Syria's largest cities, it's also the capital of the province of Aleppo which is also considered to be the country's largest province in terms of population at about 4.6 million according to the state's 2004 statistics. Aleppo is also considered to be one of the world's oldest inhabited cities.

During June/July 2012, armed opposition penetrated the city from its northern suburb axis and controlled several neighborhoods (Masaken Hanano, Sakhour, Haydariya, Tariq Al Bab, Neirab



through to Kallaseh, Salahdin and Bustan Al Qasr). Opposition areas expanded afterward to include all the neighborhoods in East Aleppo which are considered to be comparatively poor. Later on, Aleppo was divided by Bustan Al Qasr Checkpoint into two sides; the Eastern under the control of opposition forces and the Western under the control of the government forces.

Aleppo city is connected to the eastern suburbs through Shiekh Najjar neighborhood, to the northern suburbs by the Kastillo road, western suburbs by Handarat camp or the Rashideen neighborhood, and finally the southern suburbs by the Ramousa road and Ghassan bridge.





## **Introduction:**

In July 2012 and following shooting the protesters by the government's security forces in Aleppo, several local armed groups emerged in the city and its suburb in retaliation to the government forces and by October 2012 expanded its control to the Eastern neighborhoods of the city after a massive attack against the regime forces.

As the peaceful protests started to expand and accelerate in July 2016, and with the excessive use of violence in the response of the Syrian government, the city was divided into Eastern neighborhoods under the control of the opposition forces, and Western neighborhoods under government control. Following the settlement of the new borders and front lines of the city, a new chapter of suffering in the Eastern neighborhoods started with the daily attacks carried out by the Syrian Government's Air Force and artillery units.

The aerial attack carried out by government forces with the support of the Russian Air Force since September 2015 resulted in the destruction of large parts of the old city and its historical souks including the city's main souk which is listed by the UNESCO as a world heritage site and which was heavily destroyed in these attacks. They also resulted in the rise of the "refugees" catastrophe as one of the most severe consequences of the conflict in Syria.

This immigration wave escalated especially after mid-July 2016 and reached its peak in mid-December 2016 after settling the agreement of evacuating the east Aleppo neighborhood (Under the opposition control) of its inhabitants.

This report focuses on the period between the beginnings of July through to mid-December 2016. It takes into consideration the conditions of objectivity and aims at producing the report with clear timeline and events to document the violations occurred. This report is to be considered the first of a series of special reports on Aleppo during the same time period indicated above.



### **Civilians' evacuation Timeline:**

The rise of attacks against Aleppo started in the beginning of July 2016. The attacks' aim was to force a siege on the Eastern side of the city. These attacks, initiated by government forces and its ally militant groups, were accompanied by dense and violent air strikes carried out by the Russian Air Force.

By July 10th, 2016 Syrian Government forces and allies conducted a wide attack on the area of Mazar'a Al Mallah and controlled it eventually by the end of July.

The beginning of August 2016, the Syrian Government Forces and its allies controlled the vitally-important Castello Road in addition to the surrounding hills.

Controlling the Castello Road by the Government Forces and its allies resulted in the detaching the areas under the control of Opposition Forces from its surrounding, and more than 350 thousand Syrian under siege in the eastern side of the city according to Aleppo Media Center.

As Eastern areas underwent a complete siege, the Russian Government declared a "humanitarian operation" that aimed at opening three safe routes to facilitate the voluntary evacuation of civilians, however witness accounts documented by local activists confirmed targeting civilians who tried to evacuate by snipers and forbidding them crossing to the Government-controlled areas in the Western side.

On August 3rd, 2016, opposition forces initiated a wide offensive against government forces and its allies stationed in Project 1070, Hekma School, Mouta Hills, Mahroukat and Amerya.

On Saturday, August 6th, 2016, armed opposition forces began an offensive on the "Technical school" while at the same time, other forces inside the besieged areas began a parallel attack from the opposite side. This enabled the opposition of gaining control over Ramouseh Square internally and the Technical School externally, hence cleared the way and broke the siege on Eastern Aleppo.

On Tuesday, September 7th, 2016, government forces along with allies and Russian Air Force support managed to force yet another siege. A considerable number of civilians managed to flee before this siege. However, over 250 thousand civilians were trapped on the eastern side of

the city. The last offensive resulted in the destruction of large parts of the city and its vital facilities, as well as causing several medical points and field hospitals to halt its services due to the damage (1), and on Monday, December, 12th 2016 government forces and its allies managed controlling Sheikh Saad and the rest of the neighborhoods surrounding it. Since the beginning of the military offensive on the city's neighborhoods in June 2016 and until mid-December 2016, the VDC was able to document the death of 3497 civilians.

Negotiations: (This paragraph is based on the testimony of Mr. Al-Farouq Abu-Bakir from Ahrar Al-Sham, the representative on behalf of the armed opposition groups in eastern Aleppo. Moreover, we tried but failed to contact any representative on behalf of the Syrian government.)

As Government Forces and Allies gradually gained control over most of the Eastern neighborhoods after losing it to Opposition forces since 2012, and after forcing a siege against these neighborhoods for over four months, Russia and Turkey sponsored an agreement to evacuate these neighborhoods of its population including civilians, non-civilians and the wounded.

According to the opposition representative in the negotiations (Al-Farouq Abu Bakir), the opposition forces proposed a "humanitarian initiative" to evacuate civilians and humanitarian cases only, but the government's representative rejected that at once and demanded the evacuation of the entire population including civilians and non-civilians. This forced the opposition to agree out of respecting the lives of civilians and to break the months-lasting siege on these areas. The agreement also stated the evacuation of the opposition fighters with their light arms and along with their families to Idlib province.

On December 18th, Foua, and Kefrayya towns North of Idlib were brought into the negotiations as a condition to allow the evacuation of the rest of the population in Eastern Aleppo. In addition to a number of fighters and wounded in the areas Zabadani and Madaya.

Yahya Rejo - 25 - Aleppian and Media Activist in Aleppo News Network

Prior to the execution of the ceasefire agreement, there were civilians departing the Eastern besieged side of the city towards the government-controlled areas through unsafe routes. Some of them managed to arrive safely, others didn't. This caused the death of many of them under the fire of government forces and its allies. The number of those who managed is estimated to 100 thousand people.

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. Opposition armed forces responded to the demands and sent its representative from Ahrar Al-Sham to lead the negotiation process with the regime forces and to reach an agreement of securing a safe route for evacuation.

The two sides reached an agreement to evacuate the besieged from Eastern Aleppo, in exchange of the evacuation of Kafrayya and Foua towns. Each bus leaving Aleppo will have a bus in exchange leaving from these two towns.

On Thursday, December 15th, 2016 the agreement was executed under the observation of The Red Crescent and Red Cross that supervised the process of evacuating the wounded.

### **Implementing the evacuation agreement:**

On Thursday, December 15th, 2016 evacuation started after an 112-day siege on eastern Aleppo. The first convoy left from Al-Ramoussa crossing (Last point under the opposition control) to western Aleppo suburbs, consisted of 13 ambulances and 20 buses carried out injuries and civilians; 299 children, 678 civilian adults, and 28 injuries. On the way, at Al-Ramoussa checkpoint, fighters belonging to the Syrian government forces shot at 4 people from the convoy while they were trying to remove roadblocks for the buses to pass; two are members of the civil defense, and the other two are opposition fighters.

Thaer Al-Halabi (Abu-Jod) 27 years old, and a convoy escort mentioned to VDC that:

Since early hours in the morning, thousands of people arrived at the “Al-Mashhad” and other neighborhoods waiting for their turns while temperatures were less than zero on that day.

The situation was catastrophic; no shelter, no food, no water. Many civilians had to burn their luggage and furniture before leaving. Black smoke covered the entire sky.

Next day, Friday, December 16th, while the evacuation was taking place a group of government forces and the affiliated militias intercepted one of the convoys heading to Aleppo’s western suburbs and carrying 1091 near Al-Rashideen neighborhood. Testimonies confirm the death of three civilians and the injuries of six. In addition, the Syrian government forces confiscated the phones and personal belongings of the evacuees and stopped them few long hours before forcing them to turn back to eastern Aleppo.





Thousands of women and children prevented by the Syrian government forces and the affiliated militias from leaving eastern Aleppo on Friday, December 16<sup>th</sup>.

Photo by: Mujahid Abu-Aljod

Maisara K, 20 years, one of the evacuees from eastern Aleppo testified to VDC:

On December 16th, the exiting convoy consisted of civilian buses and ambulances owned by "Syrian refugee" organization. In addition, to another two ambulances for the Syrian Red Crescent. The majority of evacuees were women, children, and injured civilians.

We went out of the Ramousa road towards the Rashideen neighborhood and I was in one of the ambulances as an escort for an injured person.

While on the road, we were stopped at a Russian forces checkpoint. They counted us and left us to continue our way towards area "1070 apartments". Another Syrian government forces checkpoint stopped and ordered us to return, and after less than 500 meters we were able to see a tank closing the road and tens of soldiers being deployed. They started shooting in the air. Then in minutes, tens of Syrian government soldiers started wondering between the buses and cars and shooting in the air which panicked women and children. Then soldiers ordered us to get off the cars.

All men were gathered together including injuries, we were around 100, they started to check us and forcing to take off our clothes. The confiscated all personal papers and money. Then killed three people who they found personal arms with them.

On Sunday, December 18th, evacuation from eastern to western Aleppo started again. 1000 vehicles evacuated civilians and injuries to field hospitals were recorded on that day.

Next day, Monday 19th of December, 3 different convoys consisting of 51 buses and vehicle evacuated around 3000 people. While on Tuesday the 20th, convoy consisted of 18 vehicles and evacuated 1300 people, 21 buses, and 100 vehicles on Wednesday, and 17 vehicles on Thursday evacuating 1300 people.

According to the member of the Aleppo's local council, Mr. Ahmad Wadee, the total number of evacuees is 80 thousand including 5000 non-civilian. While according to Mr. Ahmad Brimo, one

of the evacuees in the last convoy to leave eastern Aleppo, the total number is 50 thousand most are civilians with just a few non-civilians.

### **Kefria and Foa'a agreement:**

First convoys from the two villages started on Monday, December 19th. The two villages are in the north of Idlib province and were under siege from the armed opposition groups. The agreement was reached by the Russian and Iranian on the one hand and the opposition representative on the other hand in order to restart eastern Aleppo evacuations. The agreement stated that 4000 people should be evacuated from Kefria and Foa'a in order to allow the rest of people in eastern Aleppo to leave. In addition, to allow 1500 people from Madaya and Zabadani cities in Damascus suburbs. Moreover, the agreement stated that the implementation should be carried in three phases:

- 1- Phase one: to evacuate 1250 people from Kefria and Foa'a and half of the people in eastern Aleppo.
- 2- Phase two: to evacuate another 1250 and finalize eastern Aleppo's evacuation.
- 2- Phase three: Evacuate the remaining 1500 people in Kefria and Foa'a and 1500 from Madaya and Zabadani.

Additionally, according to the agreement, another 160 should be evacuated from Zabadani, includes the non-civilians and their families to Idlib province. However, to the date of this report, both council members in Madaya and Zabadani, Mr. Husam Mahmoud and Mr. Bashar Dalati, respectively. Confirmed that no one was evacuated from the two cities.

### **Living and humanitarian situations of the evacuees:**

One of the sufferings Syrians face today are the challenges faced by the internally displaced people. In addition to what refugees in neighboring countries face from being forcibly displaced and lost their livelihood. Internally displaced Syrians face life-threatening situation every day. The places they moved to is not less risky than their original places. Western Aleppo suburb and Idlib, who received tens of thousands of IDPs from Aleppo are under heavy artillery fires and aerial attacks almost on a daily basis.

Milad Shihabi, 26 years, a resident of Hanano neighborhood in Aleppo:

Civilian IDPs from Aleppo face very difficult humanitarian conditions, especially after they were evacuated from areas besieged for more than 120 days. Some moved to the western part of Aleppo's suburbs, while others moved to Idlib suburbs (Saraqib specifically), there are other hosting centers on the Syria-Turkish borders and Attama camp in Idlib and some others in Al-Atarib city in Aleppo's suburbs.

Other civilians went towards western Aleppo and Idlib province, to where they have relatives.

These hosting centers are mainly made of caravans, unequipped and lacks the simplest requirements. This is not to mention the lack of food and medical logistics.

All the camps and hosting centers in Aleppo and Idlib are dependent on the relief they receive from different organizations, which in most of the cases not enough to close the gap due to the massive numbers of IDPs. Medical points lack many of the essential medicines and vaccines

Mohamad Ibrahim, a resident of Al-Atarib city and a member of "Be free (Taharrar)":

There are three hosting centers and few houses in Al-Atarib city, all of them host people evacuated from Aleppo. These three centers used to be schools, and lack many of the essentials.

In the city we have approximately 1300 families from Aleppo, most are women and children in addition to few injuries and ill. We are able to provide first aid services only to them. The hospital is out of service for a while, since the Syrian government forces attacked it many times before. What we have left are few medical points that are only able to provide very basic first aid services.

This Saturday, December 24th, the Syrian government air forces attacked one of the hosting centers which destroyed a fence but without any human casualties.

**Conclusion:**

- VDC provides this report to the organizations working with internally and internationally displaced people, especially the UNHCR and asks them to stand up for their responsibilities to improve the humanitarian conditions. VDC also appeals to the Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, to prevent any further deterioration of the situation after what happened in Aleppo.
- VDC considers what happened in Aleppo to be a forced displacement of civilians according to the IHL. And a war crime according to Rome Statute, subjects 6, 7, and 8.
- Violations Documentation Center in Syria condemns this systematic siege across all Syrian cities, which has been proven by previous cases to empty these areas from their residents. At the same time, VDC calls on all the international and national organizations to call for ending all sieges on civilians.
- Finally, VDC calls on the ICRC to hold accountable to their responsibilities and to work in all the possible way to provide safe passages for humanitarian and relief aid.



### **Notes:**

These figures are not final in any way, and they are subject to continuous and periodic scrutiny by center's activists, the database administrators, and the field documentation team. Figures may differ between reports, and the most recent report is always considered to be the more accurate.

VDC team pays tribute to all the collaborative activists who extended a helping hand to our center as well as to the families of the victims. We also thank the Field Observation Team whose members face daily dangers executing their duties in Syria in order to document the human rights violations committed there, complete the data, and claim the rights of the distressed families from the concerned bodies and organizations.



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