

## VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

# Life in a war-torn city: Residents of Aleppo tell their stories



The road to the Al Jadaida neighborhood in Aleppo. 29 January 2017. Photo by Sana Tarabishi, © ICRC.

*The Review has chosen to open this issue with the voices of residents of Aleppo, Syria. Fighting in the city of Aleppo has stopped since the last opposition fighters were evacuated from the eastern areas of the city in December 2016 as part of a deal, but war continues in the rest of Syria, including in large parts of Aleppo governorate. This section is meant to frame the academic discussion to follow in light of the realities faced by those who live in cities at war.*

*The stories below were told to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Aleppo on 6 and 8 February 2017. These people agreed to share their experience with the ICRC so that others may understand what their lives are like. Although*

*they have suffered much, they still have hope for the future. In order to protect them and their families, only their first names will be used.*



*Yasser is 54 years old and lives in the Boustan Al-Qaser neighbourhood of Aleppo. He worked for the Syrian government until he retired, two years ago. He had five children, one girl and four boys, one of whom was killed in the conflict when their apartment building was bombed. He moved to Aleppo in 1985 and has lived there for thirty-five years. He has witnessed the conflict since its beginning in 2011.*

As the war broke out, people took to the streets to protest against the government of Syria. Despite being threatened, I was not intimidated as most of those who threatened me were my students. Therefore, they always turned a blind eye to my attitude towards the situation.

I lived through difficult circumstances as I was left alone in the apartment building. I used to have to travel to the government-controlled area to collect my salary every sixty days.

Since the siege on east Aleppo started during Ramadan in 2016, the situation grew even more difficult as the people there were stranded for 190 days. We did not have access to the basic necessities of life; the situation there was in a state of paralysis. My youngest son was always hungry as there was nothing to eat or drink. However, today he is absolutely delighted by the fact that he can now eat bread and sweets. As we were short of water and electricity, we had to go to the farm [a small area of land inside Boustan Al-Qaser used for growing vegetables] to get two kilos of aubergine. We would stand in a queue for up to four hours. Eating aubergine dipped with sweet oil used to cost 10,000 Syrian pounds. Jam was clearly unaffordable for many people. As food items were extremely expensive, we were forced to eat different kinds of lentil-based food. As a result, I lost 25 kilos.

There was a dramatic turnaround of events as east Aleppo was taken back. I used to endure great pains to earn my salary as it took me thirteen hours to reach my destination, apart from the financial burden which this awful trip incurred. It is difficult to exaggerate the difficulties we had to run through in our lives.

I had a justifiable excuse for not leaving the neighbourhood. I used to have two apartments within the same building. Nothing seemed to disturb my peace of mind because business was thriving.

I never wanted to mix with parties engaged in the war. I was fully aware of the risks involved if armed people were to set foot in an area. The proximity of a military position to the place where we lived would put us at

risk, since this area could become a target of attack. Indeed, disaster befell me when my building came under fire and was irreparably damaged. My son

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suffocated and died in the attack. The first three floors of the building collapsed, leaving no chance for my son to survive.

We were caught between the two conflicting sides. We seemed to have been stuck between a rock and a hard place as there was no way out. I would not have wanted any human being to go through the kinds of hardships that we did.

In the aftermath of my son's death, my wife started to tremble with fear. We no longer had the chance to see our children. One of them has now been serving in the military for almost seven years. I was lucky that I was able to send my second son to Germany, hoping for a better future. Although it cost me an arm and a leg to finalize my son's travel, I have no regrets about this. As for my daughter, who had had two surgical operations before the crisis started, she sustained a tendon injury to her leg. Unfortunately, she has not had the chance to receive medical attention since the beginning of the war because of the security situation. My youngest son who had a problem with numerals made his way through education in a little mosque nearby. However, one day the mosque was heavily shelled and this shattered my son's hope for a better education. My neighbour of thirty-five years left the area permanently following intense fighting. Being the narrator, I just feel that my story tugs at everybody's heart. We suffered looting and plunder at different times.

I would never have wanted to leave east Aleppo had I not been warned. There were rumours circulating that the women of east Aleppo would be harassed. The idea of being under an imminent threat galvanized us into action. We embarked on a long journey across east Aleppo in an effort to reach government-controlled areas. We set off in the late afternoon and arrived at dawn. I was with fifteen family members and their children. The whole event felt like being on Judgement Day. There were thousands of people running for their lives.

Despite having been through extremely difficult circumstances, we always pin our hopes on a brighter and more promising future.

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*Hamed is 34 years old. He works as a technician in a water plant that is responsible for monitoring water pumps in case there is a sudden power cut. On 24 July 2012, armed groups took control of the area and the water plant, and the neighbourhood became part of the battle between the different sides. The water plant was cut off, and at one of the most difficult moments, members of an armed group attempted to loot the facility. During this time, Hamed and his colleagues worked to keep the water plant running and to ensure that water services could remain neutral.*

I am a technician in the water plant, and father to three children. My work basically involves monitoring water pumps in case there is a sudden power cut.

24 July 2012 was a catastrophic event as armed groups stormed the water station and the area became a front line. All routes to the water station were cut off after the area of Bab Al-Neirah was declared a military zone.

Despite the dangers, my co-workers and I made our way back to the water facility to resume operations under the close supervision of the management board. Several rooms at the facility were destroyed following a series of deadly attacks (shelling, mortars and bombs) on the area. However, an underground room, which was our last resort, remained intact. In the event of intense fighting, we felt trapped there, sometimes for days on end.

We experienced several deadly events over the last few years. My co-workers and I maintained a continuous presence at the station. We were in direct contact with fighters all the time. During the crisis we worked week-long shifts in two water stations. During the crisis we had a weekly shift in two water stations – Suleiman Al-Halabi

and Bab Al-Nairab. We used to cross the front lines on a weekly basis in coordination with humanitarian partners and parties on the ground.

The crossing process did not always go smoothly; we faced challenges several times. Usually, workers' names were shared with all parties prior to the crossing, but many times some workers were rejected at a checkpoint without being given a reason.

We were trained to repair and maintain the water network in the area. I was injured during one of those high-risk missions. The targeted area was unique, because it was in the middle of three different areas of control: by the government, the armed groups, and the Kurds. Clashes started suddenly, and in the midst of this I was shot and transferred to Al-Haidareyeh hospital. My house is in an area that was controlled by the government. I hid the incident and never told my family. I was not able to use a cell phone, because any communication was considered highly sensitive.

Usually we spent our week-long shift inside the building, as going outside was forbidden.

One of the most difficult moments was when an armed group wanted to loot the electric cables from the station, as they were full of valuable copper. We stood in front of them; they forced everybody to lie down and ordered them to obey their commands. We refused at the beginning, but they threatened us with their weapons, and then took the cables and a generator.

Our goal was to keep the water facility working and to ensure the water supply remained neutral. We faced horrible moments; we felt like we were part of a horror movie. We were a vulnerable group of people.

We believe in Aleppo, in the people of Aleppo. Throughout history, the city has survived many crises and earthquakes, and has adapted to very hard situations. Aleppo has a hard-working population, a generous, kind, and forgiving population. Aleppo is not a city of sleep. It will rise again with the support of organizations and its people. Aleppo will thrive again, it will be rebuilt again.

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*Mohammed is a 48-year-old father of five children. He earns his living making furniture. He has witnessed Aleppo's transformation from a safe and peaceful city to a precarious place which suffers from extreme violence and experiences regular power and water cuts.*

I am 48 years old and have five children, aged 22, 20, 16, 12 and 5 years old.

I earn my living by making furniture. Previously my business partner and I employed five workers and our revenue was excellent. However, because of the war all my good workers have fled – there are none left. We therefore spent the first two and a half years of the war without work.

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Then, I realized that life has to go on; the war will not stop suddenly. We resumed our work but at a smaller scale, as we did not have any workers to rely on. We became older. Usually by this time the manager is able to rest more and the young workers take over some of the furniture-making work.

I still remember my boss from when I was younger. He would only deal with the customers, while we (as young workers) would do all the furniture-making. But these days I have to do everything myself, and by hand. My work has been impacted negatively – prices are ten times what they were, and there is a lot of pressure and a scarcity of essential materials. However, we have not raised our prices by ten times.

My shop is situated at the front line in the Al-Mashrqa neighbourhood. The area was targeted many times by shells, and many people lost loved ones. So far, I have only suffered material damages (thanks be to God).

Many people left the neighbourhood. I do not want to exaggerate the percentage, but I would say that easily at least 40% of people left. I never ever thought to leave. Anyone who knows Aleppo very well – its unique habits and traditions – will never think about leaving. However, I do not blame people who fled the city: they had no choice but to leave. Aleppo used to be a safe city; suddenly it turned from a peaceful place into a precarious one. We had everything, and in a moment, we had nothing. The cost of living went up gradually, until it reached the current level.

I believe in God, and I am not afraid of my fate. I cannot leave my city. Here I can keep my dignity. I have heard horrible stories about the situation of refugees. I am used to being a manager or to living by my own labour, working with my hands. I cannot be under the supervision of others.

We have adapted to the situation. There were many times when my wife asked me not to go to work, because of the shelling that day. However I have to go to work – I have children to feed. I believe that death will find me anyway, even if I stay at home. I have to go to work; I cannot stay at home.

The hardest thing I went through was when I received a call from my brother telling me that the house had been hit by a shell and that my young daughters had died. Everybody thought that the girls were dead. However, although they were severely injured, they managed to recover. They are in a good health at the moment. Following that incident, I developed diabetes, and my glucose needs to be controlled.

Dozens of people were displaced from eastern Aleppo. They had very terrible stories and fled from deadly shelling. Some people managed to set up their own businesses, but others had nothing and no money to live on. We tried to support the displaced families, and one family stayed in my workshop for four months. They thought that the war would not last for more than a few months. But it lasted much longer.

My 11-year-old girl and 5-year-old boy did not have a real childhood. Thanks be to God that they are safe, but they went through bad and terrifying experiences. My son suffers from panic attacks from time to time. He usually runs and hides whenever he hears loud noises – even if it is not the sound of battle, like when a door is slammed shut.

My wife is a strong woman, but lately she has become exhausted and has had a psychological burnout. She lost her temper recently and wanted to leave the country.

Even in these areas controlled by the government, we suffered from being besieged several times during the last few years. Many items were not available in markets; essential services were also not available. My children used to have to study by candlelight. Even these days Aleppo is suffering from general power cuts. The entire city depends on generators, which is not a real solution. People have to pay more and more to cover their basic needs, and this is becoming more and more difficult for people with low incomes.

Water is an essential issue. We used to suffer from water cuts, so people had to rely on water trucking, which is an additional cost. Fuel is another issue. I had never felt cold in my life, but these past few years, feeling cold in winter became a normal part of life due to persistent fuel shortages.

Because my workshop is close to the front line, I witnessed the shelling many, many times. When the shelling started, everybody would run for shelter. Experience had shown that other shells would soon hit the area. After about ten or fifteen minutes, we would rush to the shelled area to help the injured people. Fighters in the area usually also gave help to the injured, and we got used to the sound of different weapons. We can recognize which weapon is being used from its sound.

Despite all that has happened, Aleppo is one city and Syria is one country. Community solidarity is the key issue; I believe the crisis is a dark cloud and the sun will rise soon.