

Syria - 'I couldn't take anything except dignity': stories of the leaving of Aleppo

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Evacuees from the Syrian city tell how life continued through years of bombing - until it was impossible to stay.

The Aleppo Thaer al-Halabi left behind was a ghost town filled with the shadows of friends lost to war and the shattered dreams of a different Syria.

Still, the parting resembled physical pain. He was born in Aleppo, in a house in the old town with a courtyard shaded by vines, where his family had lived for over a century. He raised a family and built a career there, and then, for four years, gambled everything he had on the possibility of taking down Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad.

"When we were forced to leave Aleppo it had already been destroyed completely. You didn't see a city, only ghosts, in a ghost city," said the 57-year-old engineer turned opposition politician.

"I am very sad I have left our city, it's at the centre of our hearts, part of our bodies. But because we need freedom we cannot live there."

Halabi said he was jailed three times by the government before the war, so when the uprising against Assad first turned into armed rebellion and rebels took half of Aleppo [1], he didn't think twice about joining them. "We had freedom for four years," he said.

Aleppo, which was Syria's cultural and economic hub before the conflict, became a byword for devastation far beyond the country's borders, after years of brutal air raids to try to oust rebels [2].

In the early years of the fighting, life in rebel-held areas was not all horror and violence. There was a local council set up to govern, schools still operated. People went to work when they were not severed from their offices by the frontline, or set up new businesses and tried to ignore the war.

"Life went on amid the bombing," said Sara, a 47-year-old teacher who also stayed in Aleppo until the enclave's final days. "There were schools, businesses, shops, there were goods and people, entertainment, everything."

For the young in particular, rebel-held Aleppo offered the wild liberties of an unfiltered web. "On the other side of the city was regular Syrian government that block everything they don't want," said Halabi's son, the activist and journalist Rami Zein.

"On our side of the city it felt like you are in a place open to the world. Before the siege it was a great city, you had everything you need, could bring everything you need from the border [with Turkey], all kinds of trade, everything was there."

As the war intensified though, death and destruction touched growing numbers of families. Aleppo

became notorious for the horror of barrel bombs, dropped from helicopters on civilian areas to spread death and fear [3].

The footballer Mohammed Khalifa's sister was among the early victims. The family had moved house to escape heavy shelling in their old neighbourhood, nearer the frontline, where planes could fly over rebel-held areas with virtual impunity.

The barrel bomb that took his sister's life also seriously injured his daughter, who was raced to Turkey in an ambulance. Khalifa followed more slowly through the border checkpoints, and when he reached the hospital a doctor mistakenly told him his daughter had died.

"I raced in to try to see her body," he said, "and they told me she actually was alive but had serious head injuries. She survived, thank God, and is with me now."

The bomb also destroyed a small shop they had set up, along with two cars, but despite their losses the family decided not to leave as the bombings intensified and a siege began.

"I wanted to stay in Aleppo because of my commitment to the revolution and its principles; I started that way and won't change until I finish," said Khalifa, 30, who said he played with the national team before the war began.

The growing bombardment prompted an exodus to refugee camps and brought those who stayed constant tragedy. "We lost so many people not just to bombs and other weapons, but also because of displacement," said Sara, who has three children and asked to use a pseudonym to protect relatives still in government-held areas.

Like many civilians in rebel-held zones, she stayed in touch with family, friends and former colleagues in west Aleppo by phone, although Assad's surveillance state usually made all but the most anodyne conversation impossible.

"We cannot talk about the war because our friend may be in danger, only hello, how are you and a few words, because Assad is watching everything," said Halabi.

After Russia joined the air war in September 2015 [4], the bombing raids on Aleppo became more intense, with huge bunker buster missiles, white phosphorus and a range of other munitions added to the constant rain of barrel bombs.

"The shelling would not stop, it continued without mercy," said Halabi. "Just to go to the market, you had to believe you were already dead, so you could have the courage to leave the house. When we got back to the house this was a new life."

Then the siege began in August [5], as the government turned to a technique that had helped reclaim other cities: starving and demoralising fighters and the civilians who supported them into submission.

"In every corner of your life you find something missing, like your mobile charge, your laptop charge, even warmth if you are cold, water for showering. You have to use everything carefully and think twice," said Zein.

They would run short of water because there was no fuel to pump from the wells. Zein felt permanently weak, cold and dirty, and would sleep for up to 15 hours a day, when illness and the temperatures allowed. "When I got out of Aleppo," he said, "I couldn't remember the last time I had a shower."

As government forces closed in, people who had turned down many chances to leave finally decided to flee, fearing imprisonment, torture, death or forced conscription if they came under Assad's control. Most left in crowded buses with little beyond the clothes on their back.

"Finally we had to get out. I couldn't take anything except my dignity with me," said Khalifa. He is now in nearby Idlib province, crammed into the home of a relative with his wife, two children, two brothers and their families.

"At the checkpoints they stopped us, searched us and took stuff from people with us. Our money, our cars, our generator, our house, all of them are left in Aleppo. We came out with nothing. As regards the future I am lost, lost, lost."

They feel luckier than most of the people evacuated to Idlib, who are struggling for shelter and food in a province covered with snow and still a war zone. The UN has said Idlib may be the next Aleppo, a focus for a new push by forces loyal to Assad.

Some who endured Aleppo's siege and bombardment say they are prepared to suffer further rather than flee into exile, because while they have lost their homes, they still have their dream of change.

"I am not going to another country, unless in the end they push me out, like they did from Aleppo," Halabi said. "I will try to stay in my country if I can."

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P.S.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/23/i-couldnt-take-anything-except-dignity-people-aleppo-syria-on-fleeing-city>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/23/syria-foreign-fighters-joining-war>

[2] ESSF (article 39760), [Syria: Fight for Aleppo is almost over - but a new chapter of misery begins](#).

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/01/-syriaairstrikes-major-offensive-against-rebel-held-areas-of-aleppo>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/russias-military-action-in-syria-timeline>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/06/syria-rebels-unite-break-aleppo-siege>