

**MSF**

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# **Aleppo's Reality:** **Daily Life** **under Barrel Bombs**

## Voices from Eastern Aleppo

**A Compilation of Testimonies Illustrating the Hardships  
of Daily Life in Eastern Aleppo under Barrel Bombings,  
through the Eyes of Local Residents**



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“Life for us has become unbearable, but we cannot afford to leave as I am fortunate to still have a job in Aleppo. Those who can afford it have left to Turkey. Others are stuck in camps on the Syrian side or are seeking refuge wherever they can just to get out of Aleppo. Daily life is full of fear: you don’t know who to trust, who you can talk to. Family life is breaking down and couples fight. Few children go to school and they have become restless and scared. Crime and looting have soared in Aleppo, which used to be a calm and safe place. The security situation is unpredictable and bombardments can happen at any moment. Life is unbearable.”

**Mahmoud**, resident of Al-Salame, Aleppo<sup>1</sup>

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1 Note that names in this document have been changed in order to protect the identity of those who provided testimonies to MSF.

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# Executive Summary

“You could be sleeping. You could be walking to the shop. At any time a bomb can happen,” says an MSF health worker in one of the hospitals the organisation runs in northern Syria. This reports aims at depicting the dreadful humanitarian situation in Aleppo city and surrounding areas especially since mid-December 2013, when the Syrian forces started a campaign of aerial bombardments and dropping of barrel bombs in this strategic area of the country.

Barrel bombs have caused thousands of fatal casualties and wounded and have had a devastating damage to infrastructure and homes. Dropped in densely populated areas, they create a climate of fear due to their unpredictable and indiscriminate nature.

Many victims become permanently maimed. Losing a limb in Aleppo city is particularly traumatic, both physically and psychologically, since wheelchairs aren't available and the context of war makes it harder for them to adapt to a new life. Moreover, shortages in medical equipment and poor levels of post-operative care have meant that in many cases doctors carry out amputations when under other circumstances the limb could have been preserved.

However, access to healthcare is now virtually impossible due to lack of supplies and qualified medical staff and medical services for the residents of eastern Aleppo have diminished to alarming levels. From an estimated 2,500 doctors working in Aleppo at the beginning of the conflict, less than a hundred remain in the medical structures still operating in the city. The rest have fled, become internally displaced or refugees, or have been kidnapped or killed.

The aerial bombardments have led to lack of electricity and destruction of houses and infrastructure. People are now seeking new ways of heating, and the widespread use of home-made combustibles has caused a number of domestic accidents, such as burnt cases among children. Treating burnt patients is very challenging in the current scenario of war and lack of medical care in Aleppo.

Vaccination campaigns are also desperately needed, but it is impossible to carry them out in eastern Aleppo: normal daily life has stopped, people are running away, and markets, schools and any place with presence of civilians are likely to be bombed.

MSF's teams have also observed an increase of obstetrical complications due to exposure of pregnant women to stress as well as lack of antenatal care for prevention and treatment of complications such as preeclampsia which in turns increases risk of preterm delivery, miscarriage and small for gestational age newborns. Premature babies need a special neo-natal care that it is hardly available now in eastern Aleppo.

Ghost neighbourhoods are the metaphor of violence and displacement. Out of the 97,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey's border town of Kilis, a 20% (19,400) arrived during the last six months. The ones staying behind do not have the financial means to move, or they fear their houses will be looted.

The psychological dimension of the war is difficult to grasp, but Aleppo, once the economic and vibrant hub of Syria and now almost destroyed and deserted, is a living tale of the collective descent into chaos. Virtually every individual has a tragic story to tell because war has affected family, friends and dear ones.

# 1 Background

Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) has been working to support individuals and communities affected by the Syrian conflict since 2011. What started as an uprising has grown in complexity, involving now many actors, a high level of insecurity, and displacing millions of people. Syria has become a human and humanitarian catastrophe where meeting the life-saving and basic needs of the affected population is challenged by the difficulties of keeping pace with the rapidly evolving situation.

Since early 2012, MSF has focused its efforts on the north of Syria, where levels of violence have been relatively and consistently high. By supporting local field hospitals, MSF has been able to provide essential primary healthcare for many communities unable to access the few remaining regular hospitals, as well as providing emergency care and surgery for those men, women and children injured in the violence, especially as a result of bombardments. MSF has also been able to conduct specialised programmes such as measles vaccinations for children and provision of humanitarian assistance such as water and sanitation services, and distribution of non-food items to internally displaced Syrians from Aleppo governorate.

Aleppo today is a city divided in two. Many families and friends are separated across east and west. Between them lies the Bustan al-Qasr crossing point, a dangerous area with frequent sniper fire causing high numbers of casualties. Mobility between the two sides is increasingly difficult, and by today, restricted to special humanitarian cases, under the supervision of Syrian Red Crescent. Many residents are fleeing Aleppo and moving to wherever they can. To worsen the situation, from mid- December 2013, Aleppo began to be heavily bombarded with the use of barrel bombs. These types of bombs cause devastating damage to infrastructure and homes, and their targeting of urbanised areas leads to high numbers of casualties and creates a climate of fear due to their unpredictable and indiscriminate nature.

The presence of MSF in this northern part of Syria has allowed it to gain a rare insight into the daily challenges faced by people in



Aleppo under barrel bombs, in particular across the eastern part of Aleppo where people face increased difficulties. Their struggles, their fears and thoughts are communicated to MSF through our work in the hospital network (be it in Syria or in Turkey). This report aims to give a snapshot of daily life in eastern Aleppo after months of intense barrel bombings, through testimonies of residents and health workers in Aleppo. It also highlights the plight of the medical staff working to provide healthcare to others in such a challenging environment and the immense courage and professionalism they demonstrate in doing so.

## 2 Life under Barrel Bombings: a Climate of Fear



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People today living in eastern Aleppo are scared and barrel bombings can be unpredictable and widespread. In many areas, daily life has all but stopped functioning...

Aleppo has much changed from the ancient and wondrous city that once aligned the famous Silk Road. The eastern part of Aleppo of today, after being ravaged by war for the last year and a half and under relentless bombardment for the past months, is a city and province wracked by fear and uncertainty. Infrastructure, where not destroyed, has severely deteriorated and the regular municipal services do not function properly. In most parts of the city the government no longer provides any services. In the east, the “free” civil administration has taken on the responsibility to carry out municipal services; however, with other priorities and a lack of funds, these services are often neglected and local communities and individuals end up trying to take care of their own neighbourhoods. Electricity is available intermittently, perhaps for an hour every day, leaving families in intensely cold temperatures during the winter months when the weather oscillates between 19° and -3°. <sup>2</sup> Large parts of eastern Aleppo city are reported to be destroyed by air bombings, such as much of Hanano neighbourhood, and residents no longer frequent markets or bus stations which could be targets of shelling.

Many neighbourhoods have now been wholly or partially emptied, leaving an eerie feeling of neglect. Abandoned homes line the streets, and thieves and looters are rife, pillaging houses and stealing personal or valuable items that families have left behind from their old lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Accu.weather.com



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“Aleppo never used to be like this. We didn’t have theft. We didn’t have looting. Now all we have is uncertainty. We don’t know who to trust and who we can speak to. We are scared to voice opinions or say anything to anyone in case there will suddenly be a violent retribution.” **Ra’ed**, hospital worker in al-Salameh, Aleppo

Barrel bombings in eastern Aleppo are so unpredictable and widespread that they sow fear among people. It is extremely difficult to take measures to protect your family and improve your safety, which contributes to higher levels of psychological stress.

“You never know when a bomb can happen! This is the problem. You could be at home having dinner. You could be sleeping. You could be walking to the shop. At any time it might happen. Especially coming to Turkey, for those who have to go to Turkey for work or to unite family members, it is a very scary route as you don’t know who you might meet and what might happen. You don’t know if you will return home alive or see your family again.”

**Tareq**, health worker in al-Salameh, Aleppo

Another aspect of this constant threat of bombardment at any moment, which has become a reality for many eastern Aleppo families, is the concept of preparing oneself for any eventuality and living every moment as if it were your last. Syrian refugees in Turkey talked about how this uncertainty affected their lives before they fled:



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“The funny thing is, we all had our bags packed... all the time! Just in case. Our suitcase was ready by the door at any moment with our most valued or sentimental possessions, in case we had to suddenly flee. This constantly reminded us of the situation, like we were in a time capsule, not living the real world. All the women of Aleppo started to sleep completely covered, with the Hijab etc., in case the barrel bombs would hit them in the night and they would be caught, dead, in their pyjamas! It sounds strange but these are things that people were really worried about.” **Miriam**, Syrian refugee in Kilis, Turkey

The residents of eastern Aleppo talk much of the weather. The reason for this, they explain, is because barrel bombings happen only when skies are blue. “*In Aleppo we now celebrate when it is a dark and cloudy day*”, said one refugee in Turkey. “*Then we know we will have some hours of respite before the next bombings start...*”

# 3

## Medical and Health Consequences of Prolonged Bombardment



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Medical needs are not being adequately addressed in eastern Aleppo. Casualties are high from barrel bombings, and in addition people seeking regular medical treatment cannot find it because of the dire shortage of specialised resources and equipment.

### 3.1. Casualties of Barrel Bombs

#### 3.1.1. Losing Family Members

The war in Aleppo, and in particular the three month barrel-bombing campaign across eastern Aleppo, has caused high amounts of fatal casualties and, unfortunately, there is likely to no longer be a family left in Aleppo that does not have a family member or an acquaintance that has been killed in this manner. Reports from 10 hospitals supported by MSF in Aleppo city illustrate the numbers of casualties caused by the violence. In just one of those hospitals, for example, three deaths and 40 injuries directly provoked by barrel bombs attacks were recorded during the month of January 2015, as a consequence of the 3 barrel bombs attacks/day registered in Aleppo City.

“One day when we were working at the hospital [in eastern Aleppo], it was a day of a high number of barrel bombings. It was like the city was in chaos and lots of people were being brought to us, dead and alive. I remember when two bodies were brought in, of an old man and his small grandson; they both had the same name. They must have been together when the bomb hit. The family was searching for them in all the hospitals of Aleppo but couldn't find them. Their neighbours had also been bombed so there was no one to ask about the whereabouts of these two. Finally they came and the bodies were identified. It was just one case, but still. We all felt so sad.” Hospital staff member in eastern Aleppo

After a barrel bombing, the damage caused on a family house is often so severe that body parts can be flung all over the vicinity. The surviving neighbours and family members go to help retrieve the body parts from damaged buildings, put them in bags and bury them according to Islamic principles. Syrian refugees were telling MSF that after this routine of body part collection, a period of a kind of hysteria begins, where people temporarily feel extremely overwhelmed and break down.

Burying the dead, however, is not always possible. Besides those who die, there are thousands who are unaccounted for. Most families have relatives who have disappeared – everyone seems to be searching for someone. Families do not know if they are dead, arrested or fled the



country. But hospitals in Syria have many bodies in their morgues that lie unidentified until they finally have to be buried in mass graves to make space for more bodies.

### 3.1.2. Losing a Limb

Another serious consequence of barrel bombs is the fact that many victims become permanently maimed, such as losing a limb which can be psychologically as well as physically traumatic.

Shortages in medical equipment and poor levels of post-operative care have meant that in many cases doctors carry out amputations when under other circumstances the limb could have been preserved.

It is almost impossible to obtain a wheelchair in Aleppo, but even more difficult to move with it in through damaged neighbourhoods and ruined houses. Prosthetic limbs and rehabilitation are also hardly accessible. This makes the amputee suffer an even greater disability and live with much reduced mobility in a city where people run when they hear the noise of planes or helicopters.

Some persons bring blown off limbs with the injured with the hope that it could be again functional, but due to the lack of means it becomes in most cases impossible.

One amputee victim of a barrel bomb spoke to MSF while recuperating in a hospital in Kilis, Turkey:



“I left my work around 1 pm and was walking near the Haluania roundabout in Aleppo when suddenly a tank bomb hit the middle of the road. I was hit badly and immediately after the explosion I could not feel my leg. A group of people carried me to a car and took me to Al Daqaq hospital, which was only 5 minutes away. By the time I had reached the hospital I had lost consciousness. The hospital staff tried to contact my family, but could not reach anyone at that time. I was taken to the operational theatre and when I woke up after 4 hours of surgery, my right leg was amputated. The left leg was full of rods and plates in order to keep it rigid. During three days I was recovering and then I was sent to the hospital in Al-Salameh. The doctors there were very good with me and cleaned my wounds regularly to prevent infection. When the doctor told me each day that I was healing and getting better it helped to lift my mood. I spent 1.5 months in the hospital until the day when we were forced to evacuate to Kilis, Turkey. Now I am here continuing to recover. I will get a wheelchair and prosthesis to support me. Yesterday my father brought me a meal that had been prepared by my wife in Aleppo. I look forward to going home and seeing her and our 3-month- old son again.” **Khaled**, 29 years, Kilis hospital, Turkey

A 15 year-old boy, Mahmoud, was met by psychologists working in a mental health program supported by MSF in Kilis. A psychologist described Mahmoud's story:



“I met Mahmoud only recently, in Kilis hospital and felt completely overwhelmed. He is a boy of 15, who was playing football with his brother near their house in Aleppo when a rocket fell right where they were playing. Mahmoud lost consciousness and was brought to a hospital. When he woke up he realised that both his legs had been amputated, and that his life would, from that day on, never be the same. I met Mahmoud one month after the incident, and he came up to me smiling and doing tricks in his wheelchair. He was looking forward to recuperating so that he could get prosthetic limbs put on and could walk again.” Psychologist, mental health project, Kilis, Turkey

### 3.2. Everyday Health Problems Faced by Eastern Aleppo's Residents

Prior to the conflict, Aleppo had a functional health system that worked in preventing diseases and made primary, secondary and tertiary health care available for the population. TB, Cancer, and many other chronic diseases were treated. Even during much of the Syrian war many of these patients managed to continue their treatment. However, since the increased levels of barrel bombings and insecurity in Aleppo started in December 2013, access to essential treatment has now become almost impossible either due to lack of supplies and qualified medical staff or because of the high security risks faced when trying to reach a health facility. As an example, due to the fact that many health facilities in the eastern part of Aleppo have closed down during the war, many patients such as dialysis patients needing insulin had to cross to the west to access private or public hospitals there. The crossing is extremely dangerous and risky. There is thus an increasing number of preventable deaths.

Other kinds of medical problems have emerged as a consequence of the bombings. The lack of electricity, destruction of houses and many windows being broken have pushed the population to seek new ways of heating. The increasingly widespread use of low quality, home-made combustibles has led to a sharp increase in the number of domestic accidents, such as burn cases among children. In the absence of consistent quality medical care, adequate materials and trained staff, treating burn patients can be complex, lengthy, painful and traumatic for patients.

Regular procedures in eastern Aleppo have become complicated. Cold winters in Syria produce an increase in respiratory infections that, under normal circumstances, can be treated. However, the current situation in Aleppo means that field hospitals serving the eastern

areas prioritise surgery and acute medical needs. As a result, lack of treatment for such respiratory conditions and others can increase under-5 mortality rates.

The fact that normal daily life in eastern Aleppo has all but stopped since the heavy bombardment started, due to the displacement of populations and the destruction of market places, schools, bus stops and other places of civilian gathering, makes it difficult to conduct health campaigns, such as much-needed vaccinations<sup>3</sup>. It is also challenging in such circumstances to stop an outbreak from occurring and spreading.

### **3.3. Born into a War Zone: Deliveries**

MSF's teams have also observed an increase of obstetrical complications due to exposure of pregnant women to stress as well as lack of antenatal care for prevention and treatment of complications such as preeclampsia which in turns increases risk of preterm delivery, miscarriage and small for gestational age newborns.

The premature babies need a special neo-natal care that it is hardly available now in eastern Aleppo. Even very basic support is limited and many of the families have to seek care for the new-born in neighbouring countries, again forcing families to separate.

Logistical problems such as electric power outages and lack of spare parts to fix electric generators can also cause problems, such as the deaths of three premature babies in one hospital.

In addition, the shortage of food, the precarious shelter, the almost inexistent EPI, the poor nutritional status of the mothers and the habit of using baby formula –now very expensive– increases the vulnerability of the under five kids. In the last years Aleppo has witnessed outbreaks of communicable diseases such as leishmania, measles, scabies, etc.

### **3.4. The Plight of Aleppo's Medical Doctors**

Medical services for the residents of eastern Aleppo have severely reduced since the beginning of the conflict, which makes it much harder to address the medical and health needs described above. From an estimated 2,500 doctors treating all kinds of medical

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<sup>3</sup> In spite of huge efforts of MSF and a number of volunteers from local organizations, the measles vaccination campaign in eastern part of Aleppo city in April-May 2013 ended up a very low coverage.

services, the hospitals still operating in Aleppo count with 97 doctors in their services. The rest have fled, become internally displaced or refugees, or have been kidnapped or killed. As an illustration of this phenomenon, in the whole of eastern Aleppo there is no longer any neurosurgeon, nor ICU doctor. Hospitals in Sakhour, Sha'ar, Shukari have been repeatedly hit by barrels bombs. First Aid Points have been affected by shelling, closed or obliged to move in Al America, Al Ansari, Bustan Al Qasar districts. The paediatric hospital that was in Masaken Hanano has closed as a result of the bombing. These issues, coupled with the low number of regular and ICU beds and incubators available, make it impossible to respond to the current needs of the population, and many patients are going to Turkey to seek medical care.

Because of the lack of electricity at night and the unspoken curfew adhered to in parts of eastern Aleppo, residents cannot drive at night with their lights on, for fear of being targeted, and patients often have to wait until morning to be taken to hospital. In fact, medical facilities and staff have been widely targeted and patients and caretakers are afraid to stay in hospitals for any length of time. The lack of beds, staff and the encompassing fear make post-operative care even more difficult and trigger early discharge of patients without being able to provide appropriate patient follow up. What should be treatable complications are in fact contributing to an increasing death toll.

Doctors in MSF-supported hospitals and other medical centres are working around the clock to deal with the effects of Aleppo's barrel bombings, as well as trying to provide regular medical care to sick patients. A number of volunteers without any medical background have stepped up to help fill the gap<sup>4</sup>, but qualified resources are desperately needed. One doctor in a hospital supported by MSF 5km northwest of Aleppo recently wrote to MSF explaining their situation:

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4 As an example, a number of non-medical volunteers participated in the Measles Vaccination Campaign in Aleppo city held by MSF in April-May 2013, without which it could not have been completed.



© MSF / Anna Surinych

“Our situation is increasingly difficult these days because of the bombings. Most doctors and nurses have left now and we are few people working under stress. We are currently a skeleton structure of staff that never sleeps. We just came out of the theatres. We are absolutely exhausted, after having performed 100 operations and treated 650 injuries in 2 months. It is hard but we persevere, with all the help we can get. We appreciate the work MSF is doing and it helps close a huge gap we have, especially in pain relief and anaesthetics, which allow us to do all the operations we do.”

Doctor in local field hospital, Aleppo



© MSF / Anna Surinych

Doctors and medical and paramedical workers in eastern Aleppo have to live through the same stressful situations as the rest of the population, as well as working in precarious and dangerous conditions in underground or makeshift field hospitals with much fewer resources than they require. Many are working as surgeons despite not having the proper training for conducting surgery and receive large influxes of wounded people at the same time. Medical staff is sometimes performing operations for 24 hours without any sleep. They spend long periods away from their family and have to work worrying about whether their family will be safe as well as whether a bomb will fall on the hospital where they work. Unfortunately, medical staff in Syria has been directly targeted during the war, in a blatant violation of international humanitarian law, which obligates parties to the conflict to protect the medical mission.

“We had a case recently that was devastating. After a period of severe bombardment, an influx of patients arrived to the hospital. An entire family was brought in - they had been attempting to flee to safety in Turkey. Two of the children were immediately killed in the bombing. Out of the rest of the children, one of the sons, Nadim, a boy of 12 years, had his leg amputated. His 9-month old baby brother Amjad had both of his feet amputated. The mother had a broken leg. But the worst of all was when the other brother, 4 years old, waved goodbye to his mother as he was taken into the operating theatre to amputate the lower half of his body. These are awful stories to witness, but it is made much harder when you feel you cannot treat them properly because you lack equipment and doctors.”

Doctor in Al Salameh hospital

Ambulances have started carrying two or three patients at one time, which was previously inconceivable but now is imperative due to circumstances. Ambulances, however, have been also destroyed in the war, which makes many patients afraid to take them. As a result, inconspicuous mini-vans or normal cars are used to transport patients despite not being equipped with the required medical equipment and having to cross dangerous checkpoints.



Drug supply is extremely challenging for doctors, and as a consequence many patients have to undergo complicated surgery without anaesthetic or accompanying antibiotics.

## 4 The Effect on Children

War has had a devastating effect on children in Syria. Disruption of schooling, state of insecurity and loss of family members are among the factors contributing to increasing psychological stress among children in eastern Aleppo.

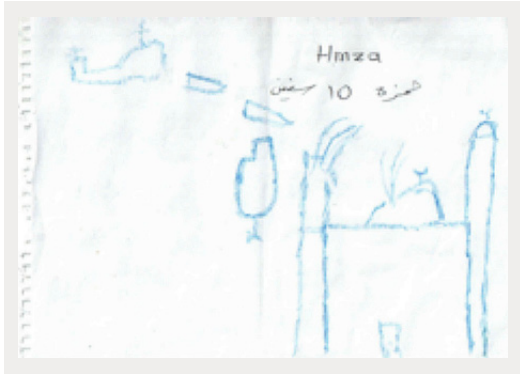
Children are one of the most affected populations during a time of war. Children under 5 years old are particularly and dangerously vulnerable to the impact of the deterioration in basic living conditions. Moreover, the shortage of food or certain types of food can greatly affect their normal growth patterns. The lack of many of the usual preventive activities, such as routine vaccinations, can weaken them when in a hostile environment such as armed conflict.

Syrian mothers have not been prepared for these food shortages, inability to vaccinate their children and the increasing necessity to give birth at home without assistance. Accessing health services has become dangerous and services themselves have become more hard to come by.

The re- emergence of deadly childhood communicable diseases in a country that was recently free of them is a distressing example of how war can kill not only with bullets but also through the destruction of the health system. Whereas Syria was reported as having relatively good vaccination coverage prior to the war<sup>5</sup>, during the last 3 years the vaccinations have been significantly disrupted due to lack of supplies and staff to implement the programmes. This has led, in certain areas, to very low levels of coverage where just one case can prompt a much larger outbreak. MSF has been addressing this problem, within available means and despite security constraints, through measles and polio vaccination campaigns for children in northern Syria.

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5 According to the World Health Organisation.



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In rural Aleppo, many children are still able to attend schools, albeit in sometimes rudimentary conditions. Many qualified teachers have fled, and as a result schooling is often carried out by local volunteers. Most schools have been taken over for use by displaced persons, military bases or hospitals, and so this informal teaching is conducted in whatever small and safe spaces can be found. As for urban areas, in many areas of eastern Aleppo city, the children are no longer going to school. Many schools have long been closed due to the insecurity for both teaching staff and children, lack of funds and high numbers of displacement from Aleppo.



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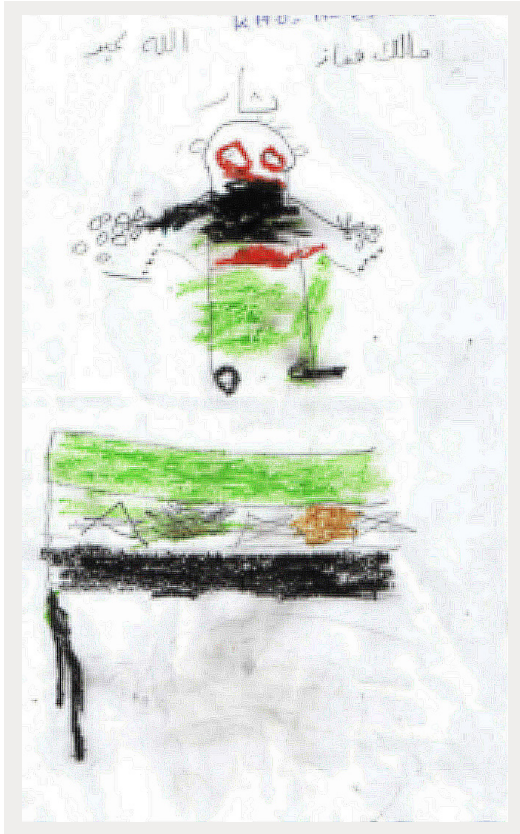
“Most schools have closed because insecurity is too high and people are too scared to send their children to school, not knowing what might happen to them. But despite the whole education system being on hold, peoples’ resilience comes out. You see instances where people invent ways to keep the children occupied, local community councils have been established to provide ad hoc services, and the “Free Council” of Aleppo also organises some activities. There are attempts here and there ... however, overall education has been pretty much halted.” Staff member, eastern Aleppo hospital

Syrian children’s drawings in Kilis

It is observed that children are becoming more aggressive and get into fights. A psychologist working with Syrian refugee children in Turkey spoke of the effects that the bombing of Aleppo and the war as a whole have had on its children.

“We see all types of children. Some are more balanced than others, but it is obvious the war has affected them all in some way or other. Those children who stayed in Syria much longer before becoming refugees witnessed a lot and managed to develop some coping mechanisms to deal with the trauma. But they saw a lot of death and destruction, and seemed to “normalise it” which is not especially healthy either. Seeing body parts became a regular occurrence. They were bored and traumatised all at once. Here in Kilis we still see many effects on children. Kids up to 15 years are wetting the bed. They have nightmares and cannot sleep. Many feel a lot of anxiety and feel insecure. Their schooling has been interrupted and they have lost touch with their friends and communities. Those children who had one of their parents killed in the bombings tend to display violent and angry behavioural patterns more than others.”

**Abu Omar**, a psychologist in a mental health programme supported by MSF in Kilis, Turkey



© MSF

Syrian children's drawings in Kilis

Children are also at risk of being caught in the bombardment if they go out of the house. When there are heavy periods of bombardment they are forced to stay indoors and get very little chance to play outside, something that is an important activity for the healthy development of children.

Often children become victims of bombings. In Kilis, Turkey, psychologists and community health workers in a mental health programme supported by MSF visit children who have been injured. The children can be distracted with games and toys, but their discourse often returns to the war. Some of them attend classes but are quite despondent and lack energy levels. The drawings they were asked by psychologists to draw of their family ended up being pictures of barrel bombs on their houses (see some of the pictures below). They play games related to the war and talk of fighting. Their families talk incessantly of the war and it seems that the war context is constantly present – they never manage to escape it.

“One child we have been working with, Muhammed, is 6 years old. One night he was woken by the sound of explosions nearby, and his family decided that they could no longer live in this insecure situation: they had to flee. They took their most urgent belongings and made their way to Kilis in Turkey. Muhammed, however, still has not recovered from the events he lived in Syria, often thinking and talking of planes, of bombs, of attacks on mosques, of dead victims. He has frequent nightmares and is constantly thinking about the war. He often feels scared and the smallest sounds frighten him. He feels angry at the people who fight which made him leave his home and school. He is only 6 and he has had to deal with so much.”

Community Health Worker, Kilis, Turkey

## 5 Family tensions and the weakening social fabric

Family separation, deaths, unemployment, political differences and forced displacement have all led to break-ups among formerly tight-knit families and communities...

One of the collateral damages of the war, and an aspect rarely commented on in the media and in analyses on Syria, is the break-up of social and family relations. Relations are stressed in the Aleppo context for various reasons, relating to political differences, economic tensions, changing behavioural patterns, and physical separation because of displacement or death.

Aleppo residents complain that living costs have increased, as a result of the general scarcity of resources during the war. Most products – even basic staples such as bread for example – have been scarce at times.

“Things were especially difficult in western Aleppo when it was besieged by the opposition and most roads were closed – there was only one way to get in and out and it was quite dangerous [because of snipers]. But 1kg of tomatoes for 100 SP in the rebel area would cost 400 SP in the government area! A gas cylinder costing 3000 SP in the rebel area would cost us 7000 in the government area! Same for bread since no flour could be brought in. So as you can imagine a whole economy grew around sending people to the other side to get cheaper goods. But sending someone was dangerous and of course cost money too, so in the end you paid practically the same expensive price!” Psychologist in mental health programme, Kilis, Turkey

People who are forced to flee lose their homes often have many belongings looted. They go to Turkey or to rent another apartment in Aleppo countryside, which is a further financial stress. Many people have lost their jobs. Some people work in transporting goods to and from the Turkish border, under stressful and insecure conditions. Those who cross to Turkey can usually find menial jobs, but are often severely underpaid (5 – 15 Turkish Lira a day, or about US\$ 7), especially because of the constraints of not being able to speak Turkish.

All these issues, coupled with increasingly frustrated children who don't go to school, deaths in the family, and constant bombardment can place enormous stress on the family life.

“I don't know how to fix my family. I feel it is broken. I work all day for my family and return home to find my wife has lost her temper again with our children and is being violent with them. If I try and talk to her she doesn't listen. I don't have much control any more, and as the father of the family I feel I am not living up to my responsibilities.” Staff member in al-Salameh hospital, Aleppo

The psychologists talking to Syrian refugees who arrive in Turkey note similar strains. Relationships become cold between married couples as they face stressful situations. Family members often stop talking to each other or, worse, fight each other because they are on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Parents find it increasingly difficult to deal with uncontrollable children who are increasingly nervous and aggressive. And fathers feel frustrated that they cannot provide economic means for their family. Increasing levels of violence are being reported between men and their wives, and between parents and their children, than was previously present in Syrian families.

## 6 Forced Displacement

The insecurity and the unliveable reality of Aleppo today, as well as the need to seek medical services or work opportunities, has pushed many residents of eastern Aleppo to flee to the countryside or towards Turkey...

It is out of the scope of MSF's capacity to record numbers of people forced to leave their homes in Aleppo; however, MSF staff have been observing large movements of people out of the city during the few months of intense barrel bombings. Those people who have decided to stay in Aleppo do so mostly because they do not have the financial means to move. Others stay in order to protect their homes from looters. But many more have fled from the insecurity and the struggles of daily life such as those described in this report.



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It appears that some of Aleppo's neighbourhoods that were more heavily bombed (e.g. Hanano, Haydariya) are emptying at a faster rate, with the majority of residents having left. In other neighbourhoods (e.g. Sakhour, al Fardous), a substantial number of residents have also left, either to other areas or to Turkey. Some neighbourhoods, such as Maysar, Jazmati, al- Marjeh and Masaraniyeh, and al-Ashrafiyya are practically deserted, with shops closed and no activity at all. The areas of Bastan al-Basha, the old Aleppo citadel and "7 Bahrat" neighbourhood are like ghost towns. The most important ancient marketplace of Aleppo has been destroyed.

A resident in Aleppo described one such neighbourhood, Jazmati:

"Jazmati is a neighbourhood in the south eastern part of Aleppo, near the airport. In late January 2014 the security situation there started to deteriorate and there was an indescribable terror unleashed upon its residents. It was an incessant bombardment by helicopters and barrel bombs, which made every day unbearable and scary. This continued until mid- February. During that period, the neighbourhood population of 2000 families was reduced to just 60 families, and people so far have been too scared to return. The possibility of the area being stormed by troops from the east is too high, especially as they are using heavy weapons. The strange thing is, when you go there, that when it starts to get dark you don't see any human beings any more in the streets. Only cats and dogs, and also rats wandering in and out of the ruins. At that time of day even the armed combatants disappear."



Some residents have been fleeing to more western parts of Aleppo or to other areas of rural Aleppo where the shelling is less severe and the situation is more normalised. They stay with friends or family or rent out empty houses in those areas. Larger numbers have been heading up to the border and stay at the makeshift (“transit”) camps for IDPs such as “Maaber el-Salame” and “Tlel el- Sham”, where the situation is relatively stable. The largest number however, are those that have managed to get some money together and head out of the country entirely, going to Turkey to stay in the refugee camps or try and find a job, along with the hordes of other Syrian refugees. Out of 97.000 Syrian refugees in Turkey’s border town Kilis, a 20% (19.400) has arrived during the last 6 months. However, they are not entitled to stay in camps. They stay outside camps, just like the other estimated 40.600 unregistered who were already living there.

Those IDPs without ID documents, however, cannot legally cross the border, placing a further obstacle for many wanting to flee.

## Concluding Remarks

The Aleppo of today, roughly divided between east and west, is a shell of its former charming self. The ancient Aleppo citadel and souq are now abandoned and lie in the dangerous no man’s land which represents the front line between fighting sides.

Everyday life in Aleppo is not simple any more, and small things have become a challenge. Many children no longer go to school, shops are closed or have shortages of food items, prices have risen sharply due to the scarcity and many people have lost their jobs. Looting and stealing is increasingly common as people ravage houses whose residents have fled to scavenge whatever they can.

The campaign of barrel bombings on eastern Aleppo since December 2013 has had a devastating impact on the population and the city’s infrastructure. Too many people have lost family members or acquaintances and death has become a frequent occurrence in Aleppo. Too many others have been maimed by bombings, and amputees are increasingly common. Many of the victims are women and children.

One of the worst casualties of the war has been the health system and medical structures. Victims of the barrel bombs, but also patients seeking regular health care or routine treatment for chronic diseases are finding it increasingly difficult to access health facilities and receive care. There are too few doctors left in Aleppo, let alone specialised expertise, medical equipment and drugs. Medical staff that has chosen to remain are forced work under difficult, stressful and precarious conditions. The doctors in Aleppo supported by MSF

work hard to treat patients, but they themselves are extremely tired and desperately need reinforcement. Like the rest of the population, they are under constant risk of bombing.

There is no respite, however, from the barrel bombs. These bombs, by design, are destined for effective targeting of urbanised areas in which there is a high concentration of civilians. Because of the widespread destruction caused by these types of bombs and their unpredictable nature, people no longer feel safe inside buildings. Instead, many are moving either to the countryside or to camps in the north of Syria, moving to Turkey if they have the means. People are terrified of eastern Aleppo becoming an enclave, and overall there is a high climate of fear.

The people of Aleppo are desperately in need of medical and humanitarian assistance. Wherever it can, MSF is supporting the medical structures that are providing medical services to the communities of Aleppo, despite the challenging environment. However, more attention on Aleppo and more aid to its surviving residents – especially those in the more neglected eastern neighbourhoods – are imperative. As the city becomes increasingly unliveable and like a warzone, MSF stresses the need to not forget the humanitarian needs of the civilian population that still remains.

#### **MSF calls for:**

- Urgent attention to the humanitarian situation of residents of eastern Aleppo and the plight of medical doctors striving to provide medical care;
- Protection of civilians and the medical mission in Syria;
- A humanitarian space which can guarantee access for humanitarian assistance and population movement.

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