Last Rebels in Aleppo Say Assad Forces Are Burning People Alive

December 12, 2016

By Michael Weiss, Roy Gutman, Alex Rowell

The Daily Beast

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/12/12/last-rebels-in-aleppo-say-assad-forces-are-burning-people-alive.html>

Amid celebratory gunfire and cheers from [Assad](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/topics/bashar-al-assad.html) loyalists, foreign militias under [Iranian](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/topics/iran.html) command and troops loyal to the regime on Monday [captured about 90 percent of the opposition-held areas of eastern Aleppo](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/cheats/2016/12/12/syria-98-of-east-aleppo-retaken.html).

The last hope of the besieged rebels, most of whom seem to have withdrawn in the face of certain defeat, had been to receive reinforcements or resupplies from their counterparts in the southern and western suburbs. That option has now been foreclosed upon as these routes are completely interdicted by the regime.

The triumphal takeover of the citadel of the Syrian revolution followed a day of intense bombing of houses and apartment buildings, destroying so many that it was impossible to determine the death toll. The neighborhoods of Bustan al-Qasr, al-Kallasa, al-Farod and al-Salhin in the Old City, as well as Sheikh Saed, in the southern district, are all now under regime control.

The Syrian Civil Defense, or [White Helmets](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2016/10/03/syria-s-white-helmets-the-life-savers-putin-calls-terrorists.html), an internationally renowned team of first responders, said more than 90 bodies of people presumed to be still alive are under debris and that its volunteer staff reported they could hear the voices of children trapped in the rubble of their houses.

A member of the group in Aleppo told al-Arabiya TV on Monday night that men, women, and children were huddling and crying in the streets and at the gates of empty buildings in the few neighborhoods that remained in the hands of the opposition. He described the situation as hopeless, because precision munitions and indiscriminate barrel bombs had destroyed the city’s medical facilities, ambulances, and fuel supply.

Unconfirmed reports, circulated by opposition media, suggest that mass atrocities have already begun, such as the summary executions of 17 in al-Kalaseh neighborhood, 22 in Bostan al-Kasrand, and the immolation of four women and nine children on al-Firdous Street. The Daily Beast could not independently confirm these figures.

The official Syrian news agency SANA claimed that eight people were killed and 47 were injured in regime-held Aleppo after opposition fighters bombed the city. Most of the victims were women and children, according to the agency.

Activists and residents of the ever-dwindling opposition pocket, an urban islet of about [five square kilometers and home to as many as 100,000 people](http://twitter.com/WilliamsJon/status/808512878370295809%5D), spent the day signing off from social media, asking journalists to tell their story, and warning of their impending demise.

The Daily Beast was able to get in touch with Abdulkafi Al-Hamdo, a university teacher in the besieged city. The brief conversation was as follows:

TDB: “I hope you’re safe.”

AA: “I don’t think I will be tomorrow.”

TDB: “Do you expect all the remaining besieged neighborhoods will fall by tomorrow?”

AA: “No. Except over the body of every civilian. I won’t surrender my body, and my wife, and my daughter to the Assad regime without defending them… I hope that you’ll tell everyone what I’m saying.”

On a publicly visible WhatsApp feed belonging to the Aleppo Siege Media Center, al-Hamdo was more fatalistic. “Doomsday is held in Aleppo,” he said. “People are running don’t know where. People are under the rubble alive and no one can save them. Some people are injured in the streets and no one can go to help them [because] the bombs are [falling on] the same place.”

Award-winning blogger and activist Marcell Shehwaro, a native of Aleppo, shared on Facebook a message from one of her most “peaceful” and least-sectarian friends. “No Marcell, don’t worry,” it read. “I will kill myself, I won’t let them arrest me.”

Lina al-Shamy, a 26-year-old woman, posted a video of herself to Twitter. Speaking in fluent English, al-Shamy said: “To everyone who can hear me. We are here exposed to a genocide in the besieged city of Aleppo. This may be my last video. More than 50,000 civilians who rebelled against the dictator, al-Assad, are threatened with field executions or dying under bombing.

According to activists, more than 180 people have been field executed in the areas the regime has recently retook control of by Assad’s gangs and the militias that support them. The civilians are stuck in a very small area that doesn’t exceed two square kilometers. With no safe zones, no life, every bomb is a new massacre. Save Aleppo, save humanity.”

Jouad al-Khateb had a [similar message—one hesitates to call it valedictory](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=218551011927665&id=100013183032111)— for the world. In Arabic, he told the camera: “Behind me is the Bustan al-Qasr neighborhood. Since last night up to the present moment, it is being bombed with every kind of weapon; vacuum rockets, missiles.

The rockets have not stopped since last night. The people coming out of Bustan al-Qasr are telling me it’s become a city of ghosts. More than 20 families remain under the rubble across various districts.” The White Helmets were unable to reach any of the victims, al-Khateb added.

“My message to those watching: Just stop the waterfall of blood for us. We don’t want to leave the besieged areas. Just stop the waterfall of blood. It’s as if this has become very normal for the international community, you know, a rocket falls, 20 or 30 people are killed, under the rubble, they can’t pull them out—that’s a totally normal thing. In any case, there’s no space for graves to bury them in. Let them be buried under the buildings. I think this will be my last video, because we’ve gotten bored of talking, bored of speeches.”

Al-Khateb was interrupted by a loud groaning sound.

“That’s a barrel bomb,” he said, referring to one of the regime’s most notorious improvised munitions, a metal canister filled with high explosives and shrapnel, which are dropped indiscriminately from helicopters.

Another trapped resident, Ameen al-Halabi, boasted on Facebook, “I’m waiting for death or imprisonment by the Assad forces. I would rather die on the soil of my land than be arrested by their faithless militias.” Al-Halabi asked his friends to forgive him if this was the last message he wrote.

On several rebel chat forums on the popular messaging application Telegram, there were calls for the youth of Syria to wage “jihad” against the conquerors of Aleppo, if only to defend the honor of women who had allegedly been raped in the course of the [Assadist blitzkrieg](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2016/11/28/assad-strikes-back-in-aleppo.html).

Whether or not that particular war crime has yet occurred in Aleppo—though human-rights monitors [have documented mass rape](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2014/10/28/escaping-assad-s-rape-prisons-a-survivor-tells-her-story.html) in Syrian regime prisons since the start of the conflict—the call for holy war against the regime may yet take hold. For this reason, the CIA and Joints Chiefs of Staff earlier advised the Obama administration that the fall of eastern Aleppo, apart from being a humanitarian catastrophe, [would also constitute a counterterrorism threat to the United States](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2016/10/03/russia-and-assad-regime-s-destruction-in-aleppo-likely-to-leave-only-extremists-standing.html). The radicalization of survivors is all but a foregone conclusion.

As for those already radicalized, they’ve had a remarkably auspicious week. While the regime was focused on reclaiming Aleppo, ISIS, or the self-proclaimed Islamic State, [was able to completely retake another ancient Syrian city, Palmyra](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2016/12/11/isis-retakes-unesco-heritage-site-palmyra-so-where-is-putin-s-army-now.html), which it had lost, [to much international fanfare](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/cheats/2016/03/27/syrian-army-recaptures-palmyra-from-isis.html), last March.

Despite the gravity of the day’s events, and the many breaches of international law that led to the collapse of the rebel-held area, U.S. political leaders were slow to comment. President Obama has watched in silence as Russia and the Assad regime have committed what Secretary of State John Kerry called crimes against humanity, and Donald Trump has not once publicly mentioned the word “Aleppo” on his favorite social-media platform, Twitter, since being elected president of the United States a month ago. Kerry even meekly invited the Kremlin over the weekend to show “[a little grace](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/10/diplomats-urge-russia-and-assad-to-show-grace-in-aleppo-victory)” in how it recaptured eastern Aleppo.

“The Holy Quran teaches that whoever kills an innocent is as—it is as if he has killed all mankind. And the Holy Quran also says whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all mankind.”

So did Obama [tell a receptive audience in Cairo](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09), in 2009, in a [much-scrutinized maiden speech](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2009/06/04/obama-in-cairo-two-thumbs-up.html) of his administration. (The second line in this sacred allusion, as it happens, is also the mantra of the now-helpless White Helmets.)

The president who came to office promising to repair the breach between the United States and the Islamic world, putatively caused by the war on terror and the invasion and occupation of Iraq, is now set to leave office having done little to stop to the slaughter or displacement of millions in Syria or the wholesale destruction of one of Islam’s most venerated cities.