

Executive Summary

November 2015

Aleppo Abandoned:
A Case Study on
Health Care in Syria

PHR

Physicians for
Human Rights



*A medic carries a wounded child following a government air strike on the opposition-held al-Maghair district of Aleppo.
Photo: Karam al-Masri/AFP/Getty Images*



A barrel bomb falls from the sky, tumbling through the air toward civilians in markets and homes. It shatters when it hits the ground. Shrapnel and nails filling the barrel fly in all directions, causing catastrophic injuries. Minutes later, after the first responders and medics have rushed to the scene to provide emergency aid, another bomb falls – targeting them. This is a double tap strike. Those left standing transport the injured and dying to a nearby hospital, where doctors race to save lives knowing at any moment they could be bombed. When the last casualty is treated, it is time to count the dead. Doctors and first responders pick up body parts and wonder whose mothers, fathers, and children the mangled limbs belong to.

The doctors, nurses, medics, and other health workers in Syria's opposition-controlled areas have been abandoned by the international community and UN Security Council. They cannot fathom how the world can stand passively by and watch as a quarter of a million people die, millions more are displaced, and civilian homes and workplaces are obliterated. They are left standing in their barren, makeshift hospitals with nothing but sandbags protecting them from the next airstrike, wondering how much longer they have left to live.

They know that as long as the world's indifference continues, the odds are against them.

Welcome to Aleppo.

Executive Summary

Attacks on Health Care as a Weapon of War

When thousands of peaceful protesters took to Syria's streets in March 2011 to demand democracy and human rights, their government shot at them, detained them in hospitals where they were seeking treatment, and arrested and disappeared doctors providing them aid. As the opposition grew in size and strength in the coming years, the Syrian government deliberately targeted civilians - bombing markets, schools, mosques, and hospitals, and besieging and restricting life-saving aid to opposition-controlled areas. The government's strategy was simple: punish the opposition and its supporters for their political views and bomb them into submission.

"You must be safe to save others. ... If you kill the physician or destroy the hospital, the medicine doesn't benefit any people."

Dr. D, a urologist working in one of Aleppo's main trauma hospitals

One significant aspect of this strategy has been a systematic assault on health care. Syrian government forces are responsible for nearly 90 percent of the 329 attacks on medical facilities and deaths of 687 medical personnel that Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has documented through October 2015. Each of these targeted and indiscriminate attacks, whether the bombing of a hospital or the detention and torture of a doctor for providing health care, is a war crime. Given the systematic nature of these attacks, these violations constitute crimes against humanity. The Syrian government's assault on health care is one of the most egregious the world has ever seen.

The UN Security Council has watched as 250,000 Syrians have lost their lives, 12 million have been displaced, their entire country has all but been destroyed, and nearly every party to the conflict has unabashedly violated international humanitarian law. Syrians have repeatedly called on the international community to protect them. The UN Security Council heard these calls and passed Resolution 2139 in February 2014, demanding an end to attacks on civilians and specifically medical spaces. But in the 18 months since the resolution was passed, the Security Council has watched silently as its life-affirming words became hollow and hundreds more medical workers lost their lives at the hands of their government. The global body charged with maintaining international peace and security has allowed power politics to reign while overlooking one of the most egregious humanitarian and human rights crises of our time.



Syrian rescue workers look up to the sky in search of warplanes in the al-Jallum neighborhood of Aleppo, following a reported barrel bomb attack by Syrian government forces.

Photo: Karam al-Masri/AFP/Getty Images

“There are weapons we didn’t imagine and injuries we didn’t see in the books.”

Dr. L, a neurosurgery resident working in a trauma hospital in Aleppo

Attacks on Health Care in Aleppo

Eastern Aleppo city, the area hit hardest by attacks on medical facilities, provides a primary example of the state of health care in Syria. PHR researchers traveled to Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey from July 22 to July 30, 2015 to interview individuals working in or supporting each of the ten currently functioning hospitals, the main aid and medical organizations supporting hospitals, and the leading organizations documenting violations and providing health assessments in Aleppo. The findings from these interviews were supplemented by secondary research conducted by PHR through its ongoing work documenting attacks on medical facilities and personnel in Syria.

Health Care Infrastructure Destroyed

Systematic attacks, both targeted and indiscriminate, have severely degraded Aleppo’s health care infrastructure. The city’s medical facilities have suffered through 45 attacks over the past three years, a significant portion of which are with barrel bombs (barrels filled with shrapnel, metal, and explosives dropped indiscriminately from helicopters that explode into thousands of pieces upon impact, devastating everyone and everything in their enormous blast radius). More than two-thirds of the city’s hospitals are no longer functioning as a direct result of the conflict, and the remaining 10 hospitals (in addition to other smaller medical facilities) are left functioning at a reduced capacity with low-quality and limited equipment. Many have been forced to move underground, which minimally increases protection from barrel bombs.

Health Workers Decimated

Aleppo’s medical workforce similarly has been reduced over the past three years. More than 95 percent of the city’s doctors have either fled, been detained, or killed, many as a direct result of the incessant barrel bomb attacks. Aleppo’s remaining 70 to 80 doctors are stretched incredibly thin. They live and work in their hospitals for weeks at a time and perform operations for which they had no formal training. These doctors and their fellow nurses, medics, and other health workers remain in the city out of duty; they understand that their departure would result in further loss of lives and decreased access to health care for the 300,000 residents remaining in Aleppo.

Impact on Access to Health Care

Despite greatly diminished staff, equipment, and facilities, Aleppo’s health workers find ways to provide treatment for typical injuries from guns, rockets, and mortar fire, ensuring the city is still somewhat livable. However, as the Syrian government transitioned from these conventional weapons to barrel bombs in late 2013, the number of injuries resulting from a single attack and their severity increased. Barrel bombs shred limbs and inflict head to toe injuries on anyone in their large blast radius. Aleppo’s skeletal health care system is no match for an influx of patients, each with numerous horrific injuries, and many residents are dying from a lack of medical care.

As shortages of personnel, equipment, medicine, and necessities such as clean water and electricity have caused a breakdown in Aleppo’s health care system, doctors have noted increases in chronic and acute illnesses. Although Aleppo has not seen outbreaks of new illnesses since the conflict began, the city is facing increased rates of pre-existing illnesses such as acute diarrhea, influenza, dermatological diseases, respiratory illnesses, and Hepatitis B. Medicine and treatment for these illnesses range from inadequate (with insufficient and low-quality medication) to non-existent, and as a result, patients are dying from treatable conditions.

Another Colleague Lost

On July 25, 2015, the only urologist working in a hospital in northern Aleppo governorate was killed when the car in which he was traveling was bombed by Syrian government forces. Many of the physicians PHR interviewed the next day had been friends with him. Dr. D said in his interview, “Our colleague who was killed yesterday worked in Azaz hospital – we won’t find another surgeon to work there. We need help to protect our people. Every physician, doctor, nurse killed, we haven’t another.”

Devastating Consequences of Attacks on Health Care

The consequences are clear: failing to stop attacks on medical professionals and infrastructure has resulted in and will continue to result in devastating health outcomes for civilians living in conflict zones. Syria's unprecedented assault on health care is not only disrupting emergency aid, but also depriving communities of routine health care and threatening their very capacity to survive. It will take decades to rebuild Syria's health care system, but the effects go far beyond the country's borders. The longer the UN Security Council continues to shirk its responsibility of maintaining international peace and security, the greater the chance these violations will become the new normal in armed conflicts around the world.

Syria's health workers have spent the past four years crying out desperately for the international community to protect them and end attacks on hospitals, medical personnel, patients, and civilians. PHR echoes their message and calls on the UN Security Council, parties to the conflict, donor countries, and the international community to implement the following recommendations without delay.



Elise Baker, PHR program associate interviews a doctor from Aleppo whose identity has been obscured for security purposes.

A Commitment to His People

Dr. A was completing his pediatric residency when the conflict broke out. Despite his family's wishes, he has remained working in Aleppo. "It's natural for a family to be against the decision because they care about their child's development as an individual, especially when the person has the potential to continue elsewhere. That's the opinion of 95 percent of mothers and fathers

in Syria." When asked what keeps him in the city, he laughed. "It's a difficult question that I'm dealing with myself. It's our country and if we leave, it will fall apart. I think maybe I will leave and specialize and come back with better skills. But then I see how much the people need me. Maybe that's the biggest thing that's keeping me inside."

"The whole world can see, but they don't want to do anything. The barrels aren't precise. They're killing civilians. Nobody in the history of the world has struck their civilians with this vicious, barbaric weapon. Forget political ideologies and religious beliefs, these barrels are killing civilians."

Dr. B, an ophthalmologist working in Aleppo

Recommendations

To the UN Security Council:

Immediately publish and implement additional measures to address the Syrian and Russian governments' non-compliance with Resolution 2139 in a manner that will, at a minimum, end attacks on civilians, health professionals, and medical facilities, and ensure the full implementation of Resolution 2165.

To the Syrian and

Russian governments:

Immediately cease and desist attacks on hospitals, clinics, health professionals, and other elements of the health care system.

To all parties to the conflict:

Immediately stop all attacks that violate the Geneva Conventions and other international humanitarian laws.

To donor governments:

Increase funding for humanitarian assistance so that the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other humanitarian organizations can increase direct cross-border aid to ensure that medical facilities in opposition-held areas have adequate equipment and supplies to address the acute and long-term health needs of the people living in these areas. Also increase funding for salaries and other operational costs to ensure that health professionals are able to remain working in Syria.

To the international community:

Given the failure of the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, support other credible justice initiatives to ensure that perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity are held accountable. These initiatives could include the creation of an ad-hoc or special court and the prosecution of appropriate cases under universal jurisdiction.



A Syrian man mourns his father following a reported barrel bomb attack by government forces in the al-Muasalat area of Aleppo.

Photo: Tamer al-Halabi/AFP/Getty Images

The full report can be found at:

phr.org/aleppo-2015



Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) uses medicine and science to document and call attention to mass atrocities and severe human rights violations. PHR was founded in 1986 on the idea that health professionals, with their specialized skills, ethical duties, and credible voices, are uniquely positioned to stop human rights violations. PHR's investigations and expertise are used to advocate for persecuted health workers and medical facilities under attack, prevent torture, document mass atrocities, and hold those who violate human rights accountable.

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