

Photos of Aleppo Rising: Swimsuits, Concerts and Rebuilding in First Jihadi-Free Summer

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When taxi and bus drivers take journalists into Syria via the Beirut-Damascus Highway these days, there's a common greeting that has become a kind of local tradition as the drivers pull into their Damascus area destinations. They confidently tell their passengers: "welcome to the real Syria." Local Syrians living in government areas are all too aware of how the outside world perceives the government and the cities under its control. After years of often [deceptive imagery](#) and [footage](#) produced by opposition fighters coordinating with an eager Western press bent on vilifying Assad as "[worse than Hitler](#)", many average Syrian citizens increasingly take to social media to post images and scenes of Syria that present a different vision: they see their war-torn land as fundamentally secular, religiously plural, socially tolerant, and slowly returning to normalcy under stabilizing government institutions.

As the most intense phase of fighting in Aleppo was unfolding in 2016, veteran journalist Stephen Kinzer took to the editorial pages of the *Boston Globe* to remind Americans that the media has created a fantasy land concerning Syria. Kinzer [painted a picture](#) quite opposite the common perception:

Coverage of the Syrian war will be remembered as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the American press... For three years, violent militants have run Aleppo. Their rule began with a wave of repression. They posted notices warning residents: "Don't send your children to school. If you do, we will get the backpack and you will get the coffin." Then they destroyed factories, hoping that unemployed workers would have no recourse other than to become fighters. They trucked looted machinery to Turkey and sold it...

The United States has the power to decree the death of nations. It can do so with popular support because many Americans — and many journalists — are content with the official story.

Now, during the first summer of relative calm Aleppo residents have seen in over four years of grinding conflict, the city commonly referred as "the jewel of Syria" is once again rising from the ashes. Foreign journalists are also accessing places like East Aleppo and the heart of the walled 'old city' for the first time. Some few honest correspondents, unable to deny the local population's spirit of hopefulness and zeal with which they undertake rebuilding projects, [acknowledge](#) that stability and normalcy have returned only after the last jihadists [were expelled](#) by the Syrian government and its allies.



A Western press and political class which generally mourned the liberation of the city from al-Qaeda groups like Nusra (AQ in Syria), calling government actions a '[massacre](#)' and '[genocide](#)', now finds a reality that can't be ignored or denied: Aleppines are returning to ravaged parts of the city to rebuild, they are enjoying nightlife, going to music concerts, staying out late at cafes; families are swimming at local pools, women are strolling around in t-shirts and jeans free of the oppressive Wahhabi fighters that once ruled parts of the city.

Kinzer's [Boston Globe piece](#) further concluded that the entire web of assumptions on Syria woven by the media and fed to the public over the years were "appallingly distant from reality" and warned that these lies are "likely to prolong the war and condemn more Syrians to suffering and death." As new photos continue to emerge of the *real* Aleppo and the real Syria it is essential to revisit the most destructive among the lies that have helped serve to prolong this tragic and brutal war.

Aleppines didn't want to live under Wahhabi Islamist rule



Andalusia Swimming Pool in Aleppo, Summer 2017 via [Syria Daily](#)

According to [multiple eyewitness reports and studies](#), the story of how war entered Aleppo's environs was not primarily one of mass public protests and government crackdown, but of an aggressive jihadist insurgency that erupted suddenly and fueled from outside the city. According to then [Indian ambassador to Syria, V.P. Haran](#) (Amb. to Syria from 2009 to 2012), Aleppo on the whole was unwillingly dragged into the war after remaining silent and stable while other cities raged. In an [interview](#) which detailed his own on-the-ground experience of the opening years of war in Syria, the ambassador said:

Soon parts of Latakia, Homs and Hama were chaotic but Aleppo remained calm and this troubled the opposition greatly. The opposition couldn't get the people in Aleppo to rise up against the regime so they sent bus loads of people to Aleppo. These people would burn something on the streets and leave. Journalists would then broadcast this saying Aleppo had risen.

Why did it take until [July 2012](#) – well over a year since conflict in Syria began – for Aleppo to see any fighting? Why did residents not "rise up" against the government?

The answer is simple. The majority of Syrians, whether Sunni, Shia, Alawi, Christian, Kurd, or Ismaili, are sane individuals – they've seen what life is like under the "[alternative](#)" [rebel rule](#) marked by sharia courts, smoke and alcohol bans, public floggings, street executions, desecration of churches, and religious and ethnic cleansing of minorities. They recognize that there *is* a real Syrian national identity, and it goes beyond mere loyalty to the current ruling clique that happens to be in power, but in Syria as a pluralistic Levantine society that rejects Saudi style theocracy.



Rebuilding Aleppo, Summer 2017. Latin Parish of St. Francis via [Sarah Abdallah](#)

The kind of religious and cultural pluralism represented in the liberal democracies of the

West are present in Syria, ironically, through a kind of government-mandated “go along, get along” policy backed by an authoritarian police state. One can even find Syrian Jews living in the historic Jewish quarter of Damascus’ walled old city to this day.

Syrian urban centers have for decades been marked by a [quasi-secular culture and public life](#) of pluralist co-existence. Aleppo itself was always a thriving merchant center where a typical street scene would involve women without head-coverings walking side by side with women wearing veils (hijab), cinemas and liquor stores, late night hookah smoke filled cafés, and large churches and mosques neighboring each other with various communities living in peaceful co-existence. By many [accounts](#), the [once vibrant secular](#) and pluralist Aleppo is now coming back to life (and largely never left government-held West Aleppo).

“Moderates” did not “liberate” Aleppo, but gave cover to an ISIS and al-Qaeda invasion



Image: “moderate” rebels mock a Christian government soldier—This photo was originally posted online by a Swedish based terror group in Syria after the Summer 2013 rebel offensive against the Menagh airbase near Aleppo. A rebel fighter mocks a captured Christian government soldier’s cross. Another photo posted in the original set reveals that the soldier was later tortured by being crushed with a large rock on his chest as he lay on his back.

One of the most under reported and least understood events surrounding the history of how all of Aleppo province and the Northern Syria region became a hotbed of foreign jihadists is the fall of the strategically located Menagh airbase near Aleppo. As a [Reuters](#) timeline of events indicates:

In early 2012 rebels take control of the rural areas northwest of Aleppo city, besieging the Menagh military air base and the largely Shiite towns of Nubl and Zahra.

After a lengthy siege of Menagh, the base finally fell to jihadist factions under the command of the US-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) in August of 2013. This event was key to rebel fighters gaining enough territory to cut off the Aleppo-Damascus Highway, which allowed them to encircle all of Aleppo for much of that year. But a little known yet hugely important detail of the Menagh episode is that rebels only got the upper hand after being joined by ISIS suicide bombers commanded by [Omar the Chechen](#) (ISIS’ now deceased most senior military commander). The fall of this government base is what opened a permanent jihadi corridor in the North, allowing terrorists to flood the area. The commander for the operation was US Ambassador Robert Ford’s personal friend, Col. Abdel Jabbar al-Okaidi, who was head of the US and UK funded Revolutionary Military Council of Aleppo (FSA). Okaidi worked in tandem with ISIS military commander Omar the Chechen and his crew for the operation – all while being [supported by the United States and Great Britain](#).

Concerning US-backed Okaidi’s close relationship to the ISIS faction in the summer of 2013, there is actually video evidence and eyewitness testimony (US Ambassador Ford himself later [admitted the relationship to McClatchy News](#)). Amazingly, the video, titled [“US Key Man in Syria Worked Closely with ISIL and Jabhat al Nusra”](#) never had very widespread public distribution, even though it has been [authenticated](#) by the top Syria expert in the U.S., Joshua Landis, of the University of Oklahoma, and author of the hugely influential [Syria Comment](#). Using his Twitter account, Dr. Landis [commented](#): “in 2013 WINEP advocated

sending all US military aid thru him [Col. Okaidi]. Underscores US problem w moderates.”

The video, documenting (now former) U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford’s visit to FSA Col. Okaidi in Northern Syria, also shows the same Col. Okaidi celebrating with and praising a well-known ISIS commander, [Emir Abu Jandal](#), after conducting the joint Menagh operation. In an interview, this U.S. “key man” at that time, through which U.S. assistance flowed, also praised ISIS and al-Qaeda as the FSA’s “brothers.” Abu Jandal was part of Omar the Chechen’s ISIS crew assisting the FSA. Further [video evidence also confirms Omar the Chechen’s role](#) at Menagh. The videos also show Okaidi proudly declaring that al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda in Syria) makes up ten percent of the FSA. The FSA was always more of a branding campaign to sell the rebels as “moderates” to a gullible Western media than a reality on the ground; it was a loose coalition of various groups espousing militant jihad with the end goal of establishing an Islamist polity in Syria.



Foreign fighters flooded Aleppo Province. The U.S. State Department’s own numbers: read the full report [at STATE.GOV](#)

In the end, terror groups like ISIS enjoyed a meteoric rise in Syria due to US government and media support for these so-called “moderate rebels” – all entities which collectively sought regime change at all costs – even the high cost of mass civilian death and suffering that inevitably results from unleashing an insurgency in urban areas.

The Syrian Army and government were never “Shia” or sectarian-based



Al Aziziyah neighborhood in Aleppo via [Syria Daily](#)

The Arab Spring narrative was the ideological lens through which experts initially pit the oppressive supposedly “Alawite/Shia regime” against a popular uprising of Syria’s majority Sunnis. As Sunnis make up about 70% of Syria’s population, it was simply a matter of numbers, and of time. But this view proved overly simplistic, and according to one little known [West Point study](#), utterly false. It was commonly assumed that the Syrian Army was a hollowed out Alawite institution with its Sunni conscripts apprehensively waiting for the right moment to defect to the rebel side. This was the fundamental supposition behind years of repetitious predictions of the Assad regime’s impending collapse, and predicated upon a view of the Syrian military as a fundamentally weak and sectarian institution. But West Point’s 2015 study entitled [Syria’s Sunnis and the Regime’s Resilience](#) concluded the following:

Sunnis and, more specifically, Sunni Arabs, continue to make up the majority of the regular army’s rank-and- file membership.

The [study’s](#) unpopular findings confirmed that the Syrian Army, which has been the glue holding the state together throughout this war, remains primarily a Sunni enterprise while its guiding ideology is firmly nationalistic and not sectarian.

The highest ranking Syrian officer to fall victim to rebel attack was General Dawoud Rajiha, Defense Minister and former chief of staff of the army, in a major 2012 bombing of a Damascus national security office. General Rajiha was an Orthodox Christian. Numerous Christians and officers of other religious backgrounds have served top positions in the Syrian

Army going back decades – a reflection of Syria’s generally nationalist and religiously tolerant atmosphere.

Mainstream press did not report from Aleppo, but was hundreds of miles away.



Outside the Citadel of Aleppo: life returning to normal, Summer 2017 via [Syria Daily](#)

The heavily populated urban areas of Syria continue to be held by the government. But most reporting has tended to dehumanize any voice coming out of government held areas, which includes the majority of Syrians. The war has resulted in over [6.5 million internally displaced people](#) – the [vast majority](#) of which have sought refuge in government territory.

The fact remains that there are some popular figures in the establishment media and analyst community who speak and write frequently about Syria, and yet have never spent a significant amount of time in the country. Throughout much of the war they’ve primarily reported from Western capitals – thousands of miles away – or, if they are in a Middle East bureau, without ever leaving the safety of places like Beirut or Istanbul. Fewer still have the necessary Arabic language skills to keep pace with local and regional events. Some have never been to Syria at all. They become willing conduits of rebel propaganda beamed through WhatsApp messages and Skype interviews, which was [especially the case](#) when it came to the battle for Aleppo. That much of the world actually considers these people as authorities on what’s happening in Syria is a joke – it’s beyond absurd.



Outdoor concert venue and Aleppo springs back to life, Summer 2017 via Maram Kasem

We are hopeful that the jihadist menace will be fully expelled and that the international proxy war which has taken so many lives and reduced much of a beautiful nation to rubble will finally come to an end. Aleppines and other Syrians are rebuilding – they are optimistically preparing for the future. Welcome to the real Aleppo.



Final national exams just before summer 2017 via [Syria Daily](#)

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