

Report from Aleppo: A Historic Moment

By [Revd Andrew Ashdown](#)

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I sensed that I was coming to Aleppo at an historic moment, and tonight I think that is true.

Throughout the night there has been an unceasing and relentless bombardment of the last 'rebel'-controlled pockets in the city, all of which I have a bird's eye view from my hotel room. Every few seconds there are huge explosions rending the air and lighting up the sky a few kilometres away, interspersed with rapid bursts of gunfire. I can see tracer bullets, and the trail of missiles as they hit their target.

This is a frightening, relentless and prolonged attack that has gone on for hours. I watch and listen with sadness and ambiguity. Sadness because as a priest I abhor violence, hate conflict, am thinking of any civilians trapped in that hell-hole and wondering how many are dying - and because like everyone else, I only want peace. But ambiguity, because over the past few years, I have been listening to the voices of ordinary Syrians whose cries and experiences of brutality and violence at the hands of extremist terrorist factions supported by the international community have been ignored by the outside world ; and whose suffering in the conflict has been exploited and heightened by the arrogant intransigence and bloody-minded single-mindedness of an international agenda that has nothing to do with the interests or human rights of the Syrian people.

The fact is, across the country, and amongst the citizens of Aleppo - including those who have finally been able to flee the terrorist-controlled areas and are emerging with heart-rending accounts of the violence and brutality meted out on them these past years by the terrorists occupying their neighbourhoods - everyone wants to see the terrorists defeated and an end to the fighting. Independent journalist, Vanessa Beeley interviewed one woman yesterday who had fled East Aleppo a few days ago and whose eight year old daughter was killed and husband shot by the 'rebels', and who saw a woman shot in the mouth asking them for food who said: "I hope the Army will show them no mercy. They are animals and deserve to die."

The international community are calling for a ceasefire. Why on earth, when the Syrian Army are making such progress which the people of Aleppo are celebrating, and when every ceasefire so far has been used to resupply the terrorists, would the Syrian Government stop now? The last ceasefire which the Government held for two weeks last month was broken relentlessly by 'rebel' attacks on Western Aleppo that killed and maimed dozens of innocent civilians. Make no mistake, this is not a Government attacking its own people. I have laid out before me a whole city, in the majority of which, and as in all other Government-held areas of the country, citizens from whatever faith or ethnic community, are getting on with their lives and living together.

I am standing a few kilometres away from the battle zone but am safe. The bombing is taking place, not across the city, but only in those small pockets of the city where the 'rebels' have held out. Most of the civilians that have been able to flee those areas are being looked after in Centres run by the Syrian Government and Syrian Red Crescent and with aid which the Russians are providing. They all tell of the 'rebels' shooting at those trying to leave. (Few know anything about the 'White Helmets' and those that do, have little good to say about them because they are working with the terrorists.)

So I stand here watching a battle with deeply mixed and conflicted feelings ... sadness at the loss of life taking place before me; but a feeling like so many others in this city that the Syrian Government has been left with no other choice.

It is only when fighting ceases that a political solution can be found, but it is clear that as long as the Western -backed al-Qaeda linked terrorists are able to operate, there can and will be no peace in the city or the country. Believe me, most Syrians are cheering their army on. The refusal of western governments and media to listen to the Syrian people, and to follow only their own agendas, has ensured that this brutal conflict and suffering on all sides has gone on for far too long. So as I watch a relentless battle taking place before my eyes, I feel that sadly, there is no other option.

And when the battle ends, in Aleppo and in other parts of the country, the long and no doubt difficult and painful task of rebuilding people's lives, and healing the pain, will begin.

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