



BRIEFING PAPER

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Aleppo humanitarian situation

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1. The latest – 12 December¹

After some of the fiercest fighting seen in the Syrian conflict, the battle for the city of Aleppo – which has been contested since 2012 – has reportedly ended after rebels withdrew from the remaining opposition-held districts of the city.

Syrian troops – supported by Russian airstrikes and fighters from across the region – had launched a full-scale assault on the city last month.

On the evening of Monday 12 December, Syrian state television reported that government forces and its allies were in control of 99 per cent of Aleppo's formerly rebel-held territory.

Tens of thousands of civilians have fled neighbourhoods in eastern Aleppo and the humanitarian situation is dire. Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said: "It is just a matter of a small period of time until its total collapse."²

There are reports of food running out and hospitals not functioning, with at least 400 critically wounded or sick people needing immediate evacuation³. There are also allegations of the use of chemical weapons in the city by government forces, though this has not been verified.

In Syria as a whole, up to 470,000 people have been killed and 13.5 million people need humanitarian aid. 6.5 million people are internally displaced and a further 4.8 million people have fled the country, with more than 800,000 having sought asylum in Europe.⁴

With the fighting continuing, efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the humanitarian situation go on, with Western powers calling for Russia and Syria to ease the suffering of civilians.

Meanwhile, as Aleppo was being recaptured by forces loyal to the Syrian regime, ISIS forces have regained control of the ancient city of Palmyra.

¹ For additional background, see Commons Briefing Papers [Iraq and Syria update October 2016](#) (published 11 October 2016) and [ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#) (published 8 November 2016)

² ['Syria: 'Battle for Aleppo is over' as rebels withdraw', monitor claims'](#), Belfast Telegraph, 12 December 2016

³ ['Syria: Urgent need for Aleppo aid access'](#), Human Rights Watch, 12 December 2016

⁴ ['Aleppo's despair shows the international community is failing Syria'](#), Conny Lenneberg, Sydney Morning Herald, 12 December 2016

2. Paris talks – 10 December

The UK, US and international partners met in Paris on 10 December for talks on the humanitarian situation in Aleppo and across Syria.

Following the meeting, the Foreign Secretary said⁵:

The situation in Aleppo remains dire with desperate images of destruction and a flagrant disregard for human life being splashed across the media on a daily basis.

We agreed our first priority must be the protection of civilians and ensuring access for humanitarian aid. It's essential that the regime and its backers provide the United Nations that access with immediate effect.

Although the deterioration of the situation in Aleppo will be a setback for the Syrian opposition it will not change the fundamentals of the conflict. There can be no military solution in Syria. We must keep pushing for a return to a political process with the credibility necessary for all parties to commit to an end to all the fighting.

3. United Nations resolutions

3.1 UN General Assembly

On 9 December, the UN General Assembly voted to adopt a Canadian-drafted resolution⁶ demanding an immediate end to all hostilities in Syria, with numerous speakers denouncing the lack of action from the Security Council.

Showing the rifts between the opposing sides, the vote was 122 in favour and 13 against, with 36 abstentions.⁷

Although General Assembly resolutions are non-binding, they do carry political weight.

In his speech⁸, Matthew Rycroft, the UK's Permanent Representative to the UN, explained "only three members of this organisation can bring an immediate end to the suffering and collective punishment - the Asad regime and their Russian and Iranian backers."

He went on:

So let us call on all parties to the conflict to protect civilians, not abduct or attack them as they leave. Let us call on them to allow the United Nations to put in place necessary measures that will ensure the protection of those fleeing and to allow the UN to play a role in planning evacuations.

In truth, whether these steps are taken or not, the fighting in Aleppo will eventually end. And when the guns fall silent over the rubble of that once great city, the war, the killing, the suffering, will all continue on elsewhere.

The Asad regime will only control one third of Syria. And despite trying, they cannot control the hearts of those fighting for peace and democracy. We cannot give up, we must not give up. We must use every tool at our disposal, including in this General Assembly resolution, to bring about an end to the suffering.

⁵ '[Foreign Secretary joins international call for humanitarian access in Aleppo](#)', Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release, 10 December 2016

⁶ When published, UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/71/130 on 'The Situation in the Syrian Arab Republic' will be available on the [UN General Assembly Resolutions](#) page.

⁷ '[General Assembly demands immediate end to hostilities in Syria, as speakers decry Security Council's continuing impotence](#)', United Nations, GA/11871, 9 December 2016

⁸ "[Did the need to reduce Aleppo to rubble to defeat terrorism?](#)", transcript of the speech delivered by Ambassador Matthew Rycroft, UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations, UN General Assembly, 9 December 2016.

3.2 UN Security Council

On 5 December, China and Russia vetoed a draft UN Security Council Resolution that called for a seven-day ceasefire in Aleppo in order to allow humanitarian aid to reach people trapped in the war-torn city.

The draft resolution would have had the Security Council:

Decide that all parties to the Syrian conflict shall cease, 24 hours after the adoption of this resolution, any and all attacks in the city of Aleppo, including with any weapons, including rockets, mortars, and anti-tank guided missiles, and including shelling and airstrikes, to allow urgent humanitarian needs to be addressed for a period of seven days.⁹

It would also have held that the Security Council:

Expresses its intention to consider further extensions for seven-day periods on a recurring basis, and demands that all parties allow and facilitate immediate, safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to all of Aleppo by the United Nations and its implementing partners.”

Before the action, Russia’s representative Vitaly Churkin said that Western member states had rushed the vote – in violation of Security Council procedures – and ignored progress in negotiations between Russian and the US on the withdrawal of fighters from Aleppo and on humanitarian relief. He claimed a ceasefire would only allow the fighters to reinforce their positions and prolong the conflict.¹⁰

The US representative disputed this assessment and said there was no imminent agreement and that Russian wanted to delay Security Council action in order to continue its air strikes.

Following the vote, there was widespread condemnation of the action taken by Russia and China. In his speech, the UK’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Matthew Rycroft, said¹¹:

Put simply, they [Russia and China] have chosen to veto, not because of a lack of consultation, but because of their longstanding, misplaced faith in a despot who has killed nearly half a million of his own people. Who has sanctioned the murder of civilians as they flee the bombed out ruins of Aleppo. A despot who would rather reduce Syria to rubble than to negotiate an overdue peace.

[...]

Even if Russia will not use its influence to stop the bombing or permit humanitarian aid to be delivered, it is not too late for Russia and the regime to prevent even worse atrocities. Russia can still ensure the protection of civilians leaving eastern Aleppo. Russia can still enable the UN to protect those fleeing and allow the UN to have a role in planning evacuations.

The world and the Syrian people will not forget Russia’s role in carrying out and in supporting the regime in carrying out such heinous crimes in Syria. Look again at the faces of those left, starving, bleeding, dying in Aleppo. They are not terrorists. Look again and change course. We had a chance today to help those people, to stop the

⁹ [‘Security Council fails to adopt resolution calling for ceasefire in Aleppo’](#), UN News Centre, 5 December 2016

¹⁰ [‘Security Council fails to adopt draft resolution to end attacks on Aleppo as two Permanent Members cast veto’](#), United Nations, SC/1269, 5 December 2016. The section on Action on Draft Resolution provides statements from several delegations.

¹¹ “We had a chance today to help those people, to stop the bombing, to let aid in. We have once again failed, but we must keep trying until we succeed.”, transcript of the speech delivered by Ambassador Matthew Rycroft, UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations, UN Security Council, 5 December 2016.

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4. Joint Statement – 7 December 2016

On 7 December, the leaders of the UK, US, France, Germany, Italy and Canada issued a Joint Statement on the situation in Aleppo. It read¹²:

A humanitarian disaster is taking place before our very eyes. Some 200,000 civilians, including many children, in eastern Aleppo are cut off from food and medicine supplies. Aleppo is being subjected to daily bombings and artillery attacks by the Syrian regime, supported by Russia and Iran. Hospitals and schools have not been spared. Rather, they appear to be the targets of attack in an attempt to wear people down. The images of dying children are heart breaking. We condemn the actions of the Syrian regime and its foreign backers, especially Russia, for their obstruction of humanitarian aid, and strongly condemn the Syrian regime's attacks that have devastated civilians and medical facilities and use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons.

The urgent need now is for an immediate ceasefire to allow the United Nations to get humanitarian assistance to people in eastern Aleppo and to provide humanitarian relief to those who have fled eastern Aleppo. The opposition have agreed the UN's 4-point plan for Aleppo. The regime needs to agree the plan too. We call on the Syrian regime to do this urgently to alleviate the dire situation in Aleppo; and call on Russia and Iran to use their influence to help make this happen.

We urge all parties in Syria to adhere to international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has spoken about war crimes being committed in Syria. There must not be impunity for those responsible. We call on the UN to investigate respective reports and gather evidence to hold the perpetrators of war crimes to account. We are ready to consider additional restrictive measures against individuals and entities that act for or on behalf of the Syrian regime.

At the same time, Russia is blocking the UN Security Council, which is therefore unable to do its work and put an end to the atrocities. The regime's refusal to engage in a serious political process also highlights the unwillingness of both Russia and Iran to work for a political solution despite their assurances to the contrary. We support the efforts of the UN Special Envoy de Mistura to resume the political process through negotiations. Only a political settlement can bring peace for people in Syria.

¹² ['Joint statement on Aleppo: 7 December 2016'](#), Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release, 7 December 2016

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