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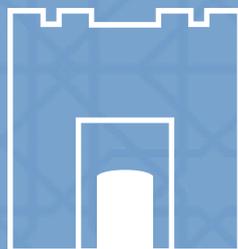
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# From Rebel to Regime: Barriers of Return to Aleppo for Internally Displaced People (IDPs)

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# From Rebel to Regime: Barriers of return to Aleppo for Internally Displaced People (IDPs)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As of March 2018, 384,425 Aleppians remain internally displaced inside Syria with 62,970 residing in Idlib governorate. This portion in Idlib represents 16.3 percent of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) from Aleppo. The approximately other 83 percent that were displaced by the conflict relocated inside of Aleppo governorate (70 percent) or Ar-Raqqa (13 percent).<sup>1</sup>

This report focuses on the residents of Aleppo that are displaced within rebel-held areas, specifically Idlib governorate. These IDPs face the most difficult barriers to return to their homes in eastern Aleppo, a regime-held area. Their current conditions are insecure with continued violence in the region and little economic security. They live in dire conditions with makeshift and rented houses. They have limited access to healthcare and education facilities for their children. Despite being on Syrian territory only a few kilometers from their home they are not able to return.

There are several barriers that prevent IDPs to safely return to their homes. These barriers are compounded due to the post-conflict environment and the political unbalance related to the regime control over Aleppo. Barriers include physical safety such as military and intelligence services, limited transportation and fear of checkpoints. Additional barriers of economic limitations are the lack of economy and industry, looting of houses and businesses and physical destruction. IDPs face more than one barrier at a time and even if they find a solution to one they still have to face others.

These barriers have led to three main concerns for building an Aleppo that facilitates the return of IDPs from rebel-held areas. These concerns are continual fear of persecution, limited reconstruction and social re-engineering of the city. A crosscutting theme through all barriers is the fear of persecution for being associated before or currently with the opposition. The uncertainty of not knowing who will be targeted and for what reason reduces the chances of their return. Post-conflict Aleppo has seen a drastic change in the social fabric of the city. There is a clear divide between those that opposed the regime and those who did not. The unequal treatment of citizens could lead to rising tensions and discriminatory policies. The moderate and selective reconstruction of the city is preventing and discouraging Aleppians to return.

*This paper was presented at the fourth Lemkin Reunion, held in February 2018 and organized by the Shattuck Center at the School of Public Policy, Central European University in Budapest. The paper is based on research carried out by the authors in 2017 at Shattuck Center's Aleppo Project.*

## AN INSIGHT INTO A VULNERABLE AREA

In 2011 Idlib city was home to approximately 120,000 Syrians,<sup>2</sup> and in February 2017 the city's population was over 200,000.<sup>3</sup> This includes around 17,000 Internally Displaced People (IDP) from eastern Aleppo.<sup>4</sup> Due to Idlib being one of the only rebel strongholds left, Idlib Governorate has received large waves of IDPs from all parts of Syria. The area's limited capacity to absorb the constant influx of people and already weakened infrastructure by the conflict have created a humanitarian crisis. The governorate does not have the resources to fully provide medical supplies, access to sanitation and electricity. The overall situation has led to a shortage of employment leaving the displaced with little to no income to survive.

Since the December 2016 eviction of eastern Aleppo, military operations by the Syrian army in Idlib Province have been limited to random bombings and shelling. In January of 2018 the Syrian government launched a major offensive into southeastern Idlib with the aim to regain control of the Abu a-Dhuhur airport. It was previously an important military airbase controlled by the regime before its capture by the rebels in 2015.<sup>5</sup> This push by the Syrian government has forced over 70,000 people to flee areas in northern Hama and southern Idlib due to airstrikes and bombings.<sup>6</sup> The increase in attacks has shown Idlib city and hospitals as the main targets in the region. The displaced people are moving farther into Idlib Province or near to the Turkish border to places such as the Atma camps, to escape the violence.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that the situation in Idlib continues to change on a daily basis due to the increase in hostilities.

### Life in Jarablus refugee camp

*Jarablus is one of the many camps where IDPs have resettled. In Jarablus, there are 197 living spaces for 1002 people.<sup>8</sup> Only 12% of the evacuated population decided to move to the camp. Many consider their life in camps as humiliating and are scared for the safety, and health of their children. There is not enough food for everyone and very limited schooling opportunities for children or medical points. In 2016, people living in Jarablus did not have access to bread for at least one year. If they wanted it they had to buy it with their own finances.<sup>9</sup>*

## **BARRIERS**

### **a) Militias and Intelligence services**

Militias still continue to have a daily presence in Aleppo with the two main groups being Liwa' al-Baqer and Liwa al-Quds Filistini. These groups include pro-regime members and Palestinian fighters. There are also smaller groups with non-Syrian Shia militants made up of Iraqi and Lebanese fighters. Hezbollah, a political and military part of the Lebanese government, has its military bases on the eastern edge of Aleppo and a presence in the city.<sup>10</sup> These militia groups control the city, acting as gangs that specialize in violence and nefarious activities. These activities include theft, prostitution, and drugs, creating a lucrative illicit industry. Civilians are subjected to arbitrary killings and kidnapping, perpetuating already existing fear in the city.

There is a fear that male residents between the age of 18 and 50 in eastern Aleppo will be taken by intelligence services for conscription into the Syrian Army. Those living in western Aleppo can choose to pay “monthly royalties” for their children to avoid compulsory military service.<sup>11</sup> For richer residents, the only choice is to pay the bribe or smuggle their children out of Syria. Personal security is a major concern for most resident of Aleppo returning from rebel-held areas.

### **b) Transport**

Syrians wanting to move from the western countryside or Idlib Governorate to Aleppo city, have only one way. There is no available route from rebel-held areas to regime-held areas in the western countryside, they must pass through the Kurdish area. They must first take a bus to Afrin, a city located in People's Protection Unit (YPG) controlled territory.<sup>12</sup> From Afrin they will be taken to Nubbol and Zahraa,<sup>13</sup> a majority Shia twin-town, northwest of Aleppo. Once there, they have to cross into regime-held area and then take a bus to the center of Aleppo. One interviewee explained that the YPG forces make travelers wait in hordes for long periods of time before they are given safe passage to Nubbol or Zahraa by bus.<sup>14</sup>

### **c) External Checkpoints**

There are several checkpoints throughout the YPG area and into regime-held areas that civilians encounter. Residents of Aleppo living in the western countryside claim that both areas use extortion and demand money at the checkpoints to let them continue further. Some people travel back to Aleppo to gather their salaries or pensions and spend most of their money paying to go through checkpoints.<sup>15</sup>

Those traveling across checkpoints without proper documents could be denied entry, be conscripted, forced to pay a fine or potentially be detained. This is particularly true for men, even if they have their military service booklet. Due to the constant displacement and upheaval many Aleppians living in the western countryside lack proper documents and identification.<sup>16</sup> For men between the ages of 18-50 it is dangerous to cross through the checkpoints into regime-held areas.

#### **d) Internal Checkpoints**

The Syrian army and militia groups controlling Aleppo maintain checkpoints within the city, especially in neighborhoods that IDPs use to cross from the eastern part to the western part. Civilians are stopped and forced to pay a bribe “to let goods or workers pass”.<sup>17</sup> The government continues to claim that these checkpoints are for the security of civilians and denies that extortion is a common occurrence.

#### **e) Economy and Industry**

There are currently 6,000 factories and industries in Aleppo compared to the 65,000 before the war.<sup>19</sup> Aleppo was a trade hub for industrial companies that specialized in textiles, metals and manufacturing.<sup>20</sup> It accommodated about one third of the country’s industrial workers. A majority of the workshops and factories have been severely damaged or looted since the conflict. The city has seen a slow revival of industry since the rebels were evicted but it is difficult to run a business with power shortages, excessive bribes and limited workers.

A large portion of the potential workers have been conscripted or live in remote areas which requires them to pass through checkpoints. This necessitates that companies must pay high fees to militias to let workers pass. Due to the large destruction inflicted on the industrial sector, those that were displaced are not likely to return to their previous livelihood. According to a survey by the Aleppo Project, it is probable that the unemployment rate will remain high despite the potential for returnees because of the damage done to the economic infrastructure.<sup>21</sup>

#### **f) Looting**

Until January 2017 there have been reports of houses and businesses being looted. The Aleppo Project summarized in early January how regime troops were involved in extensive looting.<sup>22</sup> Houses were being systematically looted by residents living in the western Aleppo, security officials and militia groups. It has become a business where each thief has a specialization; there are those who are interested in copper and others in stealing doors.<sup>23</sup> Some IDPs have returned to eastern Aleppo because they feared their house would be looted. Those who live in western Aleppo and have property in the eastern part of the city found their houses were looted multiple times.

#### **g) Physical Destruction**

In January 2017, the United Nation satellite imagery identified 33,521 damaged structures in Aleppo.<sup>24</sup> “64 percent of the urban houses in Aleppo have been” fully destroyed or partially damaged.<sup>25</sup> There has also been severe damage to water systems, the electrical grids and medical facilities. The eastern part of the city suffers from water shortages and depends on electricity to pump water. There have been reports of water prices skyrocketing and when the water does reach residents there are complaints of the quality.<sup>26 27</sup> The government still supplies some of the electricity but residents depend heavily on generators and 12-volt car batteries.<sup>28</sup> Medical and education facilities have been a target during the conflict with 57 medical clinics and 49 education institutions destroyed.<sup>29</sup>

These deficiencies make it difficult for residents to sustain their basic needs. Some areas of the city are completely closed off to the public and only through the consent of government authorities can civilians enter.<sup>30</sup> Most of what has been cleared are the main streets and sidewalks in the eastern part of the city. The Syrian government has declared 15 areas as priority for reconstruction. An independent investigation found that eight of the areas were not in eastern Aleppo.<sup>31</sup> The government news agency reported that there has been \$48.5 million awarded to contractors to rebuild Aleppo. Unfortunately, this amount is far from the billions that are needed to rebuild the city.

### **Main Concerns And Policy Implications For The Future Of Aleppo**

There are three main concerns that could result in continued displacement of IDPs and perpetuate the divide within Aleppo.

#### **a) Persecution**

Some Aleppians have expressed their desire to go back but fear of persecution and detention inside of Aleppo and at checkpoints has prevented them from returning. If someone is wanted by the regime or is a demographic (such as young men or those from eastern Aleppo) targeted by the regime then they are at risk of being conscripted, tortured or killed. There have been reports that even women, who were safe from being arrested before the government reclaimed eastern Aleppo, are being taken by the regime. In one interview, there was a woman who was taken by the regime after the 2016 eviction of eastern Aleppo and her family had to pay \$4,000 dollars for her release.<sup>32</sup> She was taken because she knew someone who was connected to the revolution. This fear is a significant barrier for many IDPs wanting to return because they don't know who will be targeted by the Syrian government and what they could be targeted for.

The climate of the city is now calm compared to the previous years of conflict when violence was a daily occurrence.<sup>33</sup> Despite the Syrian government's attempt at normalcy, armed militia groups and security services still patrol and maintain control of the city through intimidation, kidnappings and extortion.<sup>34</sup> These tactics perpetuate an atmosphere of fear that gives little comfort for families to return to their previous lives.

#### **b) Social Re-engineering**

Since the end of the conflict the social fabric of the city has been changing. The majority of Aleppians that are now displaced are Sunni Muslims. The minority Alawite still dominates government power inside of Aleppo city. Aleppo was recognized to be a multicultural city but the demise of its population has drastically changed this aspect. For instance, many of the minorities escaped the city during the conflict. Only a third of the Armenian population remains.<sup>35</sup> There is a division between those who decided to oppose the government and those who did not.

A growing concern is that these new cultural dynamics will affect the future social makeup of the city and prevent reconciliation. In order to achieve durable peace there is a need to secure the possibility of a non-divisive and equally distributed life for the people of Aleppo.

### c) Limitation to Reconstruction

The reconstruction of the city has been slow and hampered by limited funding. One of the first areas of planned reconstruction includes parts of the Al-Madina Souq. A historic market, which was famous for the multiplicity of trade, that used to take place before the conflict. In November 2017, the city celebrated the partial re-opening of the Souq.<sup>36</sup>

The government, through a legislation called Decree 66\*, is contracting private companies to rebuild parts of the city. Part of the private funding comes from organizations related to the Russian and Iranian governments. For instance, the “Iranian Reconstruction Authority” is supposed to rebuild fifty-five schools around Aleppo Province. The extent of Russian involvement is still unclear even though Assad has emphasized “the importance of Russia as a partner in the process of reconstruction.”<sup>37</sup>

*Decree 66\* is a legislation signed by the regime in 2012 and is now being used as financial and legal foundation to rebuild certain cities in Syria. The decree originally aimed at providing the legal and financial basis for the reconstruction of informal settlements and unauthorized housing.<sup>38</sup> The governor of the city of Homs has already started plans for the reconstruction for specific areas of the city such as Baba Amr. This model was first pioneered in Damascus. A private holding company owned by the government is taking care of the reconstructions financed by private sector investors.<sup>39</sup> By using this Decree regime cronies are prioritized when it comes to hiring companies for reconstruction. It also means that the regime decides which areas to prioritize by leaving behind those locations formerly held by regime opposition.<sup>40</sup>*

Decree 66 does not allow for participation of local citizens and business owners who own property in the city. This is a top-down, elitist approach with private companies and international influences as the main decision makers. In order to address lack of citizen’s engagement Edward Hanna suggests the creation of an interactive platform to preserve a space of dialogue and ensure inclusion of everyone in Aleppo.<sup>41</sup> The current process discriminates against those that were or are from previous opposition held areas. These areas will be the slowest to be rebuilt, if at all. The financial backing of private companies will reinforce these discrimination policies and make it difficult for people to return to a economic and social livelihood.

# ALEPPO SIEGE AND EVICTION TIMELINE

## PRE-SIEGE

Nearly 6 million people, lived in the Aleppo Province. Six years later, more than half of Aleppians have been forcibly displaced abroad or scattered across other rebel-held areas and other regime-held areas of Syria. Although people had been leaving before the violence began, 2014 marked a turning point: over half a million people fled.

## 2016 THE SEIGE OF 160 DAYS JULY 16

The government besieged the eastern part of Aleppo blocking all access to food, water or medical supplies to an estimated 250,000 people left inside. The besieged inside included rebel fighters, medical teams, civil defense, civil society members and civilian families including women and children. Attacks were carried out by the Syrian Armed Forces and Russian fighters against those in the besieged area

## NOVEMBER 24 TO DECEMBER 18

The violence escalated and families were forced to choose between staying in besieged areas or crossing into regime-held areas. This resulted in 53,773 people registering as IDPs in western Aleppo. The Syrian Armed Forces dropped leaflets and sent SMS messages encouraging civilians to leave the besieged areas and move into government-held areas. Al Arabiya reported that over 4,000 men who fled the eastern part had been arrested and conscripted to fight for the Syrian Armed Forces.

## DECEMBER 18

A deal was made between Turkey and Russia that allowed the removal of all rebels remaining in eastern Aleppo to leave to the Western countryside. 184 buses left eastern Aleppo within two days carrying approximately 36,000 people including women and children. According to OCHA there were people leaving the eviction buses to stay in regime-held areas instead of crossing over to rebel-held areas. The majority of those who remained on the bus were taken to the western countryside of Aleppo and Idlib province.

## POST-SIEGE

After the eviction only 26,070 people were displaced to over 99 different locations in rebel-held areas like Idlib province and the western countryside. The remaining are un-registered, stayed in regime-held areas or attempted to be smuggled to Turkey. The majority of those displaced went to urban areas and about 12 percent of them went to IDP camps in northern countryside of Idlib and Aleppo province.

## IDP MOVEMENTS

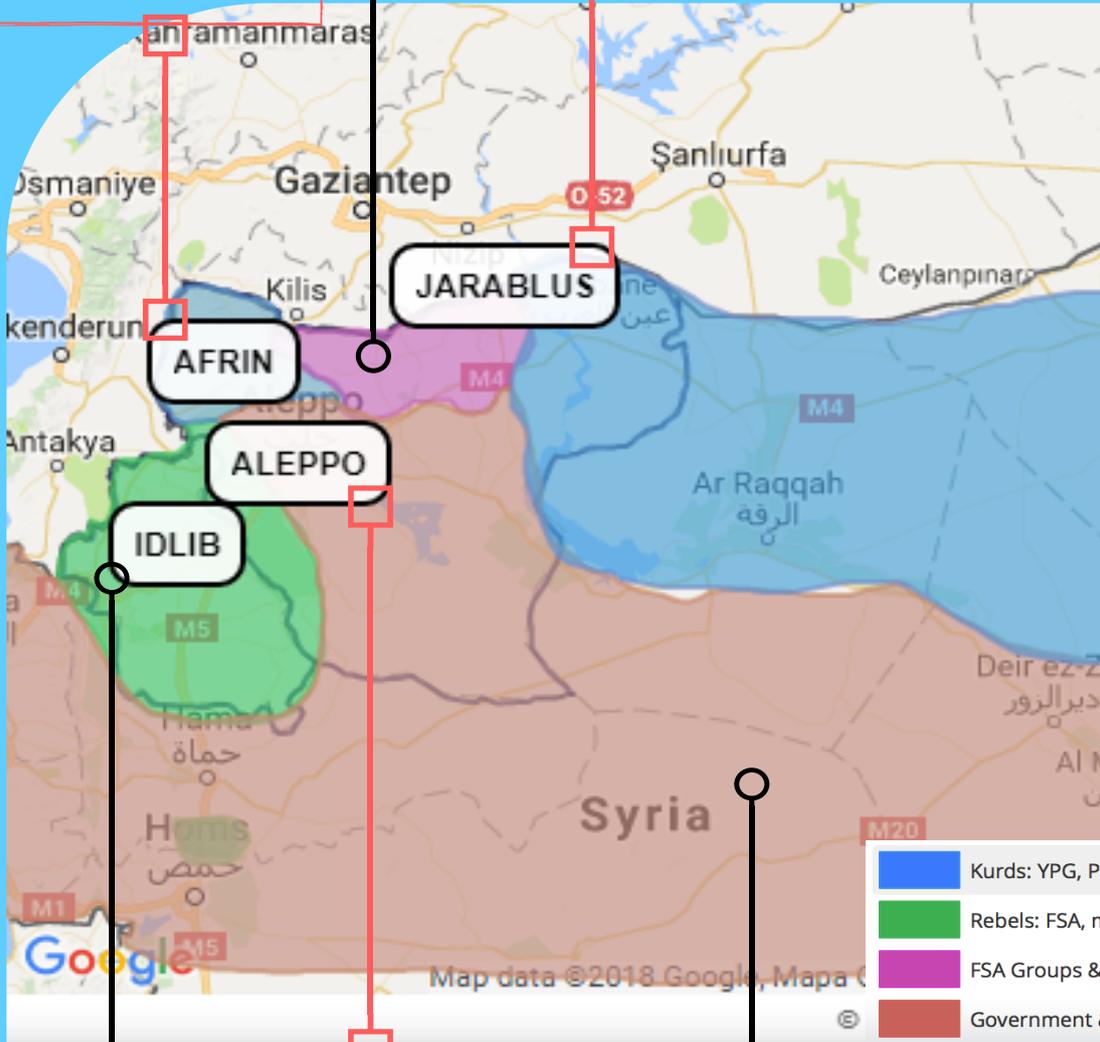
While the total number of displaced is difficult to count, preliminary calculations suggest that 177,000 have been evicted from Aleppo. This number combines those that are registered inside other parts of Aleppo and those that were forced out after the siege. As of January 2017, 141,000 people were registered as Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) within western Aleppo and almost 36,000 were evicted from eastern Aleppo in December of 2016 (Lund 2017). This number does not include those that went to other cities and areas inside of Syria during the conflict.

## Areas of Control & Significant Landmarks

Controlled jointly by rebel forces and Turkish military troops. This is the Euphrates Shield and considered to be much safer for IDPs because there is lower risk of attacks compared to the western countryside.

Crucial link by which IDPs from rebel-held areas pass through to regime-held areas. IDPs from the western countryside need to take transportation from here to continue on to Aleppo.

This camp runs along the Turkish border and is where some Aleppians were moved after the forced eviction.



The eastern and the western sides of Aleppo city are under regime control. On December 18, 2016, 36 thousand Aleppians were evicted after a siege that lasted for almost half a year.

The Syrian government has been backed by The Russian Federation both financially and militarily. Paramilitary Shia groups such as the Iraqi group Al-Nujaba and Lebanon's Hezbollah have also provided military assistance.

Idlib province and the western countryside are controlled by a coalition of rebel factions including moderate Islamist groups. IDPs are the most vulnerable in this area due to their exposure to airstrikes and bombings.

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Each year the Shattuck Center hosts the Lemkin Reunion, a gathering named in honor of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish lawyer who lost his family in the Holocaust and first coined the word genocide. He campaigned tirelessly during his life to ensure that the crime of genocide was enshrined in international law. The Lemkin Reunion will gather policymakers involved in responding to atrocity crimes and assess the lessons they learned.

This year, the Lemkin Reunion, with the participation of expert panelists, and external seminar participants, as well as specialists from the CEU community, examined the obstacles to return through the identification and categorization of the different obstacles that those who decide to fully or partially return are facing, in addition to the categorization of actors causing these obstacles.



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