

# Syria Crisis: Aleppo's Deadly Aerial Warfare

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The Syrian air force jet roared over, making people crane their necks and flinch at the same time.

A small dot - a bomb - detached from the plane as it disappeared over the buildings on the horizon.

We counted to five before it hit, a deafening explosion that rattled the windows. A large black cloud billowed up, blotting out the sky at the end of the road.

It was noisy chaos when we got there.

A crowd of dozens quickly became a couple of hundred as men ran in from side streets to help. A white pick-up truck was enveloped in flames. A circle of scorched earth, 30-40m across, radiated out from it. Weeds on the edge of the blackened concrete were still burning too.

A plump woman in a headscarf and floral robe - her housedress - was pulling a small boy along by the hand. "Abdo, Abdo." She called out, the name of a man who ran to scoop up the child.

"Abdo, my family is dead."

She was barefoot, fleeing what remained of her home in a three storey apartment block. Part of the block's facade had gone, the roof collapsed. There were still people inside.

## 'No choice'

Men climbed up the outside of the building, scrambling over the steep slope of the fallen roof. They searched frantically for a gap in the masonry, tugging at lumps of rubble.

Black smoke filled the street. A man shouted, pointing to the building: "Civilians! Bashar, you pig! You enemy of God!"

The crowd began a defiant chant of "God is great". Then all at once they stopped and people ran in all directions.

"Tayara! Plane!" the man next to me screamed. We jostled, stumbling over rubble and twisted metal, trying not to trip over each other in our panic to get away.

When the plane did not return, the crowd came back to watch the rescue once again. Most of the outer wall on the top floor had disappeared. We were looking into someone's front room.

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Rana

From the gloom in the back, a Free Syrian Army fighter emerged carrying two little girls in pyjamas, a third following. The girls were dazed and covered in dust but uninjured. The chant of "God is great" resumed louder.

Before the girls could be brought down, the crowd started to shift uneasily. There was a crackle of automatic fire from the fighters on the ground. They might have been shooting, hopelessly, at an approaching plane, or in the air to get people moving. Either way, something was coming this time.

Diving into the nearest cover - a garage with a thick concrete roof - we saw the silvery outline of a drone flying high, not a jet coming in fast and low.

People drifted back to the apartment block but we decided it was time to leave. We learned later that 10 people were killed there.

They included a three-year-old boy and his mother, buried in the rubble. Two girls, aged 10 and 12, died playing in the street.

Days later I met 10-year-old Rana, one of the three girls pulled alive from the wreckage of the building. The three-year-old was her nephew.

His mother - her aunt - and an uncle were among the dead. She was still in shock from the loss and from the whole terrifying experience.

She was playing a computer game - "Zouba" - when the bomb hit. "The lights went out, then the roof collapsed," she said.

"I started screaming and didn't stop until a Free Army fighter came through a hole and took me out after half an hour. My two friends were coughing and screaming as well."

Her father, Abu Hassan, his head bandaged, was angry at the regime but also at the rebels. They had, he said, put an anti-aircraft gun on the next building.

"I told the commander to remove it. He promised he would do it by the end of the day but after two hours the airstrike happened."

He went on: "I am not against the Free Syrian Army but I told them that gun would get hit. I told him, 'The FSA will hide and they will get us'."

Woman and child running through street after air strike in Aleppo, Syria  
Aleppo has faced six weeks of aerial attacks by government planes

The rebels says they have no choice but to fight and often to do it from residential areas. They tried to hide their positions, said a local commander, Mudar al-Najar, but they were plagued by informers.

And, he said, the regime was happy to kill civilians "deliberately", hitting hospitals and bread queues in Aleppo.

"They do it on purpose to push the people away from us," he said.

"This regime doesn't know how to fight. It knows only how to kill. They don't confront us man to man. They attack only from a distance with artillery and airstrikes."

### **'What do I do?'**

It is many months now since the Syrian regime started sending fast jets against its own people in an attempt to suppress the rebellion. This escalated further what is now best described as a civil war.

A man points towards a bombed house in Aleppo, Syria The UN says more than 18,000 people have been killed across Syria since violence erupted in 2011

Planes have been used since the beginning in the battle for Aleppo. When the jets start to bomb, it can go on for hours. Each low pass overhead is a nerve-shredding experience.

In rebel-held parts of the city, they have endured six weeks of it.

"MiGs," people cry out as the planes pass overhead, though the aircraft we saw were some kind of training fighter, Czech-made LAM 39s we were told later.

After we left the neighbourhood where the airstrike killed 10 people, we watched from a distance as a jet did return finally to drop another bomb.

The plane's wings were still see-sawing slightly after releasing its payload. It flew so low I felt I could have seen the pilot had I not flung myself to the ground.

The jet then made a slow 180-degree turn to come back and strafe the area where it had dropped the bomb.

A thumping sound filled the air. A panicky voice came from a Free Army commander's radio: "The plane is coming. I have only a Russian [a Kalashnikov]. What do I do?"

The commander answered: "Aim your gun at the plane and say 'God is great'. Say 'God is great' on it while you fire."

## **Fighting alone**

The Free Army in Aleppo has no shoulder launched ground to air missiles. The planes make almost leisurely turns over the city to come back again and again. The pilots don't act as if they believe they are at any risk of being shot down.

Building on fire in Aleppo, Syria

Free Army commanders say the outside world - especially Western and Arab governments - bear ultimate moral responsibility for this. Everywhere we went, people were bitter.

"I want to ask you a question," said the commander I'd spoken to about the FSA's share of the blame for civilian casualties.

"Why is the whole world watching and doing nothing? The dead are laying in the streets. We bury people in gardens. Why is the world protecting Bashar?"

Western governments don't want to step into Syria, fearful of the many ways that could go wrong. They are all the more reluctant after the last week's turmoil elsewhere in the Middle East.

In Aleppo, the Free Army claim to be inching forward in a grossly uneven fight against artillery and air power. For the time being, at least, they have no illusions that anyone is coming to help.