

Aleppo – The Untold Story

Basel, who lives in Faringdon, first spoke to Faringdon Peace Group in April 2015 about the conflict in his native country Syria. Unfortunately since then the situation has only got worse. In December, before the fall of Aleppo to Government forces, he gave us his unique perspective on the city of his birth.

Aleppo, the 2nd largest city in Syria with a long and rich history, was the economic and business capital of the country. More than 80% were Sunni Muslims with a large and diverse Christian community, living peacefully side by side. Its location near the Turkish border makes it strategically important for the supply of arms to the rebel areas of Idlib and Latakia.

Although the conflict began with peaceful demonstrations for democracy and freedom, this cause was very soon stolen from the Syrian people as other groups and countries saw opportunities to further their own interests. It quickly became an international proxy conflict with fighters from 80 countries involved. Russia, USA, Iran, Turkey, Isis, the Kurds and Assad's government all have their own agendas and goals. Strange alliances are formed and the opposition is split into different rebel groups often fighting each other. When the government forces lost control of East Aleppo in summer 2016, 80% of the rebels were not from Aleppo.

The Syrian people, the silent majority, who just want to live in peace are the main victims. Before the war, although there was a dictatorship, there was stability and efficient infrastructure and services. As the government siege tightened on Aleppo the aid stopped, people lost incomes and some were forced to join militias or government forces. Food inflation rocketed to 300% and water became a weapon – fighting for control of it and stopping others getting it. Hospitals were bombed, leaving 300,000 people in Eastern Aleppo with virtually no access to health services.

Although no-one wants to leave their homes, half the population of Syria has been displaced. 95% of the refugees have been settled in just 5 countries: Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Lebanon - where they make up 20% of the population. Gulf states have offered no resettlement places for refugees. The Vale of the White Horse has so far resettled 4 Syrian families under the government Vulnerable Persons scheme.

Basel warned us against demonising either side in this complex conflict where there are good people trying to make peace on both sides. Both government forces and the rebels have refused to allow humanitarian corridors and children have been killed on both sides. The truth is difficult to find in the media which have their own agendas. The West's policy of regime change in the Middle East has left a vacuum which extremists have filled and the same would happen in Syria with the removal of Assad. Basel believes democracy should come from inside the community and that other countries should keep away. Their interference is more to do with gaining control in the area, perpetuating fear, selling weapons and supporting Wahhabism and the Saudis than it is to do with establishing democracy.

Basel believes it is now too late for a purely Syrian solution to the war and that the only way would be an agreement between USA and Russia. He says there will be no outright winners. However fractured the country is, he hopes people will try to work together to repair and rebuild Aleppo and the rest of Syria, rather than take revenge. But even in the rebuilding, all countries will want something in return and Syria will lose its independence. It is said that whoever wins Aleppo will win the war. Since Basel's talk, Assad's government has taken control of Aleppo and there are fragile peace talks. Our thoughts and hopes are with the Syrian people, including Basel's own family.