

OPERATION ALEPPO

Russia's War in Syria

**The Inside Story of
Putin's Military
Intervention in the
Syrian War**

TIM RIPLEY

OPERATION ALEPPO:

RUSSIA'S WAR IN SYRIA

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Operation Aleppo

Back Ground Material

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Syria's Armies in 2017

Briefing for
The European Centre for the Study of
Extremism "Syria: Six Years On- From
Destruction to Reconstruction"
Conference

April 5th- 6th, 2017

By Tim Ripley

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Tim Ripley

Journalist and war correspondent, 1990 to date

Author of 20+ books on military history and technology

Correspondent for The Sunday Times, The Scotsman and Jane's Defence Weekly, covering wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Also reported from NATO Headquarters, EU in Brussels, UN in New York and Pentagon in Washington DC, as well as NATO exercises in Turkey



Open Source Intelligence and the Syrian Conflict

Syria is perhaps the most “reported on” conflict in the modern era.

There is just a “torrent” of news reports, video, still pictures, social media posts, Skype interviews coming out of Syria.

Every Syrian soldier and fighter has a smart phone to film their exploits - but there are few “independent international journalists” on the ground. The only other places that is comparable is Yemen. How do you make sense of all this information when every faction or international player puts its own spin on events?

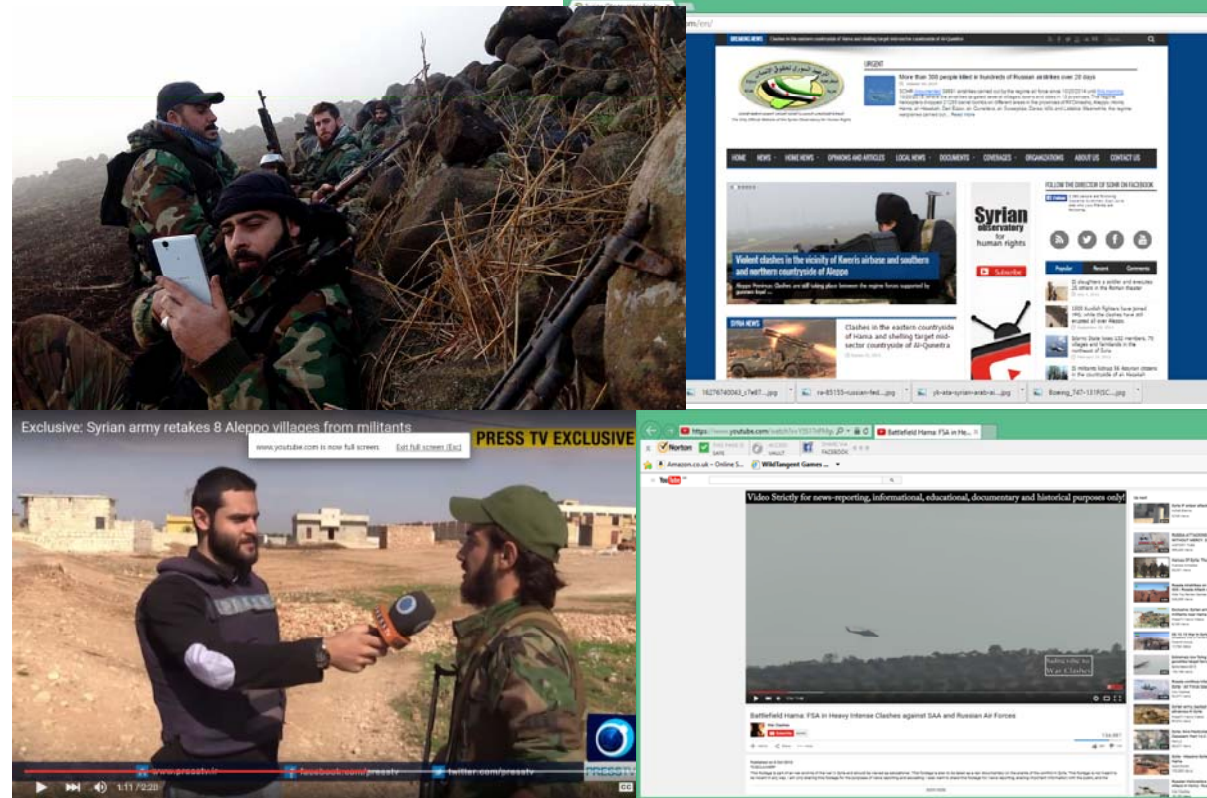
What is Open Source Intelligence?

The comparison and analysis of multiple sources of information, including:

1. Analysis of news media reports from within Syria
2. Analysis of social media still and video imagery from Syria, Turkey and Russia. Syrian soldiers and militia fighters, Shia militia fighters and Russian servicemen incessantly post on-line photos of themselves and their fiends.
3. Syrian, Russian, Turkish, Lebanese Hezbollah and other government information products
4. Google Earth and other commercial satellite imagery

By Geo-location and comparing the above, it is possible to gain a reasonable “ground truth” about what is happening on the ground.

NOTE: All the images in this brief are all sourced from “raw” video imagery from Syria over the past two year



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Syrian Desert Hawk Brigade Operation to take Hill 410 and Police Hill, 26 November 2016

Sources:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nht3XwJiT_I

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZVMYDi6ZcA>

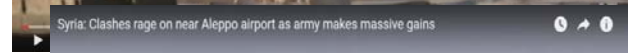
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=Q-mUayM4PU0

OPEN SOURCE INTELLIGENCE IN ACTION

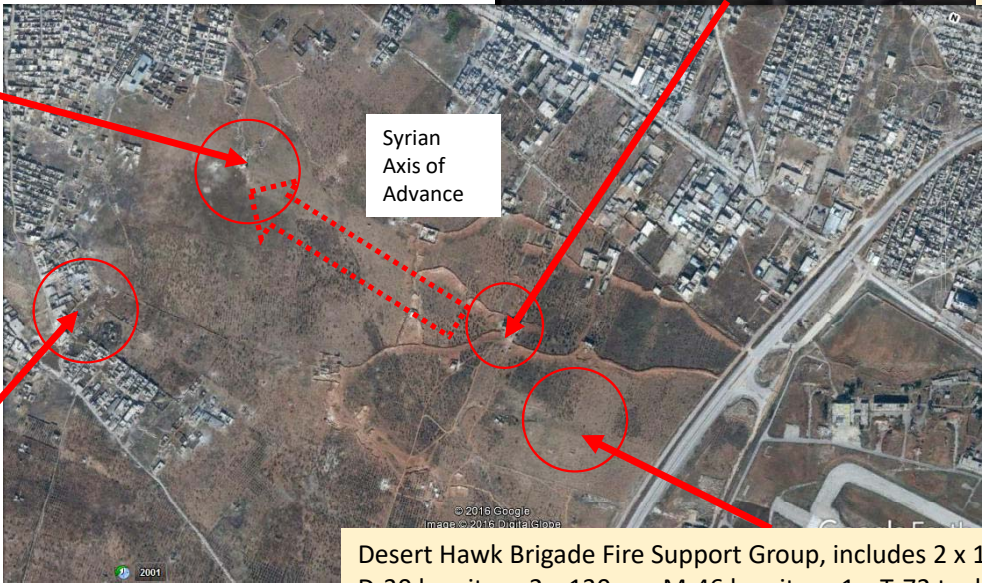
What does this clip show?

- Identifies commander of unit
- Location of events
- Size and equipment of unit

Enables cross references to track unit at later phases of the war



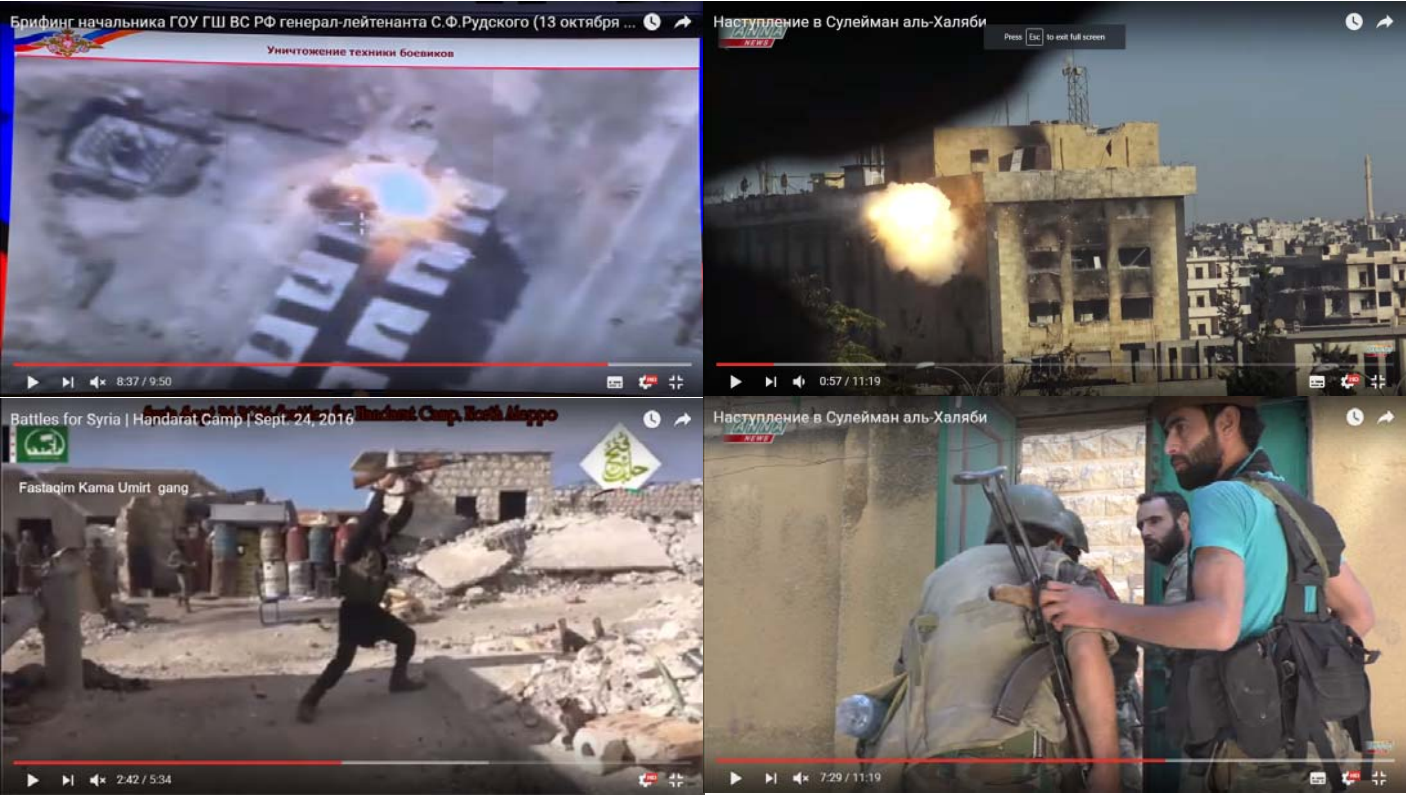
Desert Hawk Brigade Command Group. Its commander, Colonel Jaber, is in centre with cap and radio in hand



Desert Hawk Brigade Fire Support Group, includes 2 x 122mm D-30 howitzer, 2 x 130mm M-46 howitzer, 1 x T-72 tank, 1 x BM-21 rocket launcher, 1 x towed rocket launcher, 1 x uparmoured ZSU-23-4 anti-aircraft vehicle. Note DH insignia



Battle of Aleppo – September to December 2016



What really happened during the Battle of Aleppo? What does this say about Syria's Armies?

Syrian Arab Army and Allied Deployments Battle for Aleppo – Who Was there?

Compiled by tracking units over several weeks

- Other Units involved in Operation
- Fatemejoun Afghan Shia Brigade
 - Interior Ministry Special Forces
 - Elements of 4th Mechanised Division
 - Iman Ali Baqir Shia Militia
 - Al Baath Brigades
 - Aleppo National Defence Force Militia Reinforcements to Aleppo
 - Syrian Marine Battalion (arrive 25/11/16)
 - Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) militia (arrive 25/11/16)

Assault Groups
At key points around the rebel enclave the Syrian Arab Army positioned assault groups, comprising around 500 elite infantry with BMP troop carriers, tanks, artillery and rocket launchers to break through rebel out defence lines

Palestinian Liwa al Quds Militia "assault group"

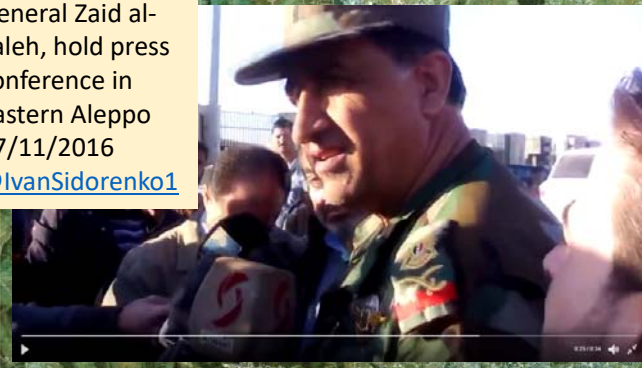
Tiger Force – Falcon 6 "assault group"
106th Brigade Syrian Republican Guard

Kurdish YPG Militia

102nd Brigade Syrian Republican Guard

Syrian Republican Guard
Palestinian Liwa al Quds Militia
Iraqi militia

Syrian military commander in Aleppo, Major General Zaid al-Saleh, hold press conference in eastern Aleppo 27/11/2016
[@IvanSidorenko1](#)



800th Syrian Republican Guard Regt "assault group"
83rd Battalion SRG
Iraqi Nujaba militia

Desert Hawks Brigade "assault group"
State of the Shield Iraqi Militia Battalion
Liwa al Baqir shia militia battalion

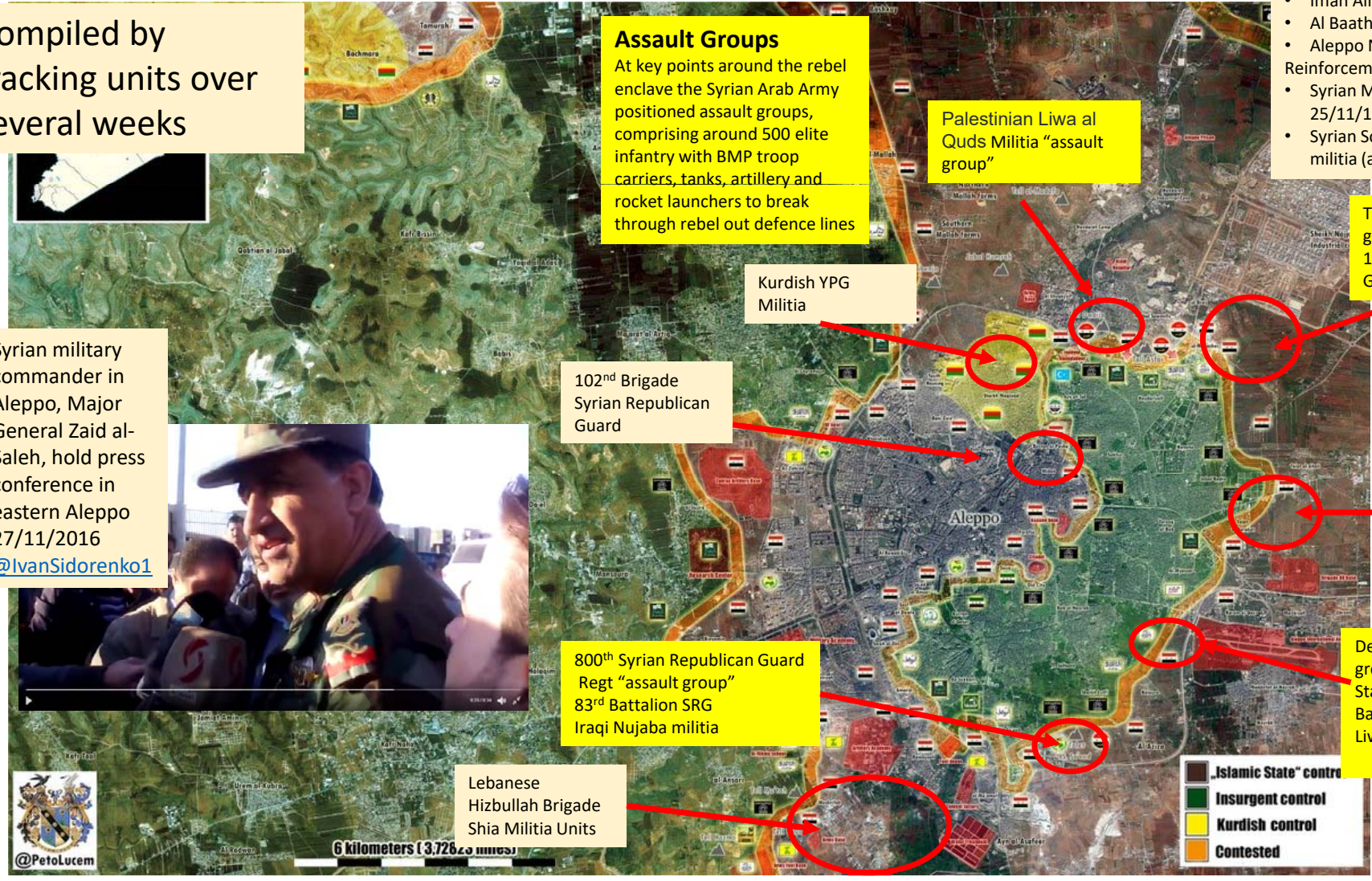
Lebanese Hizbullah Brigade Shia Militia Units

Legend:

- "Islamic State" control
- Insurgent control
- Kurdish control
- Contested



6 kilometers (3,726 miles)



Russian Air Strikes – 24 Sept – 17 Oct 2016

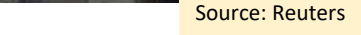
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Source: AFP



Source: Reuters



Source: Reuters

The most controversial aspect of the Battle for Aleppo has been Russian air strikes, which rebel groups, US, UK and French governments and some NGOs say deliberately target medical facilities and civilians, making them “war crimes”. These accusations are strongly denied by the Russian government and military.

CASUALTY ESTIMATES

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a report in late Oct 16 that 406 people had been reported killed and 1,384 wounded in eastern Aleppo from 23rd Sept 16 until 8th Oct 16. In government-held western Aleppo, which is frequently targeted by rebel shelling, 91 people including 18 children were killed over a similar period

IHS Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Centre reported on 12th Oct that it had recorded 362 fatalities between 19th Sept and 3rd Oct, of which some 51% were civilians.

RuAF and SyAF Air strikes on Eastern Aleppo, 22/9/16 to 18/10/16
Source: SOHR, Reuters and other news agencies

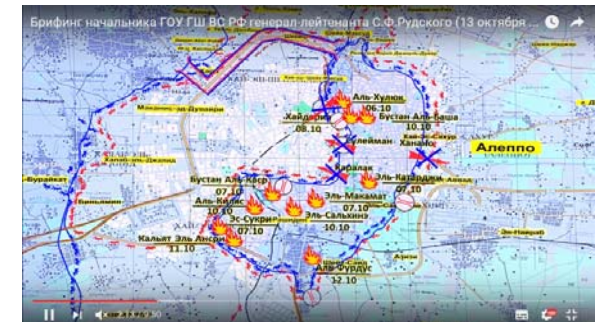
Date	Number Air Strikes	Deaths
22/09/2016	2	
23/09/2016	5	47
24/09/2016	7	52
25/09/2016	12	27
26/09/2016	4	12
27/09/2016	17	26
28/09/2016	9	12
29/09/2016 ?	?	
30/09/2016	4	18
01/10/2016	1?	
02/10/2016	12?	
03/10/2016 ?	?	
04/10/2016 ?	?	
05/10/2016 ?	?	
06/10/2016 ?	?	
07/10/2016	1?	
08/10/2016 Nil	?	
09/10/2016	1?	
10/10/2016 Nil	?	
11/10/2016	6	35
12/10/2016	7	79
13/10/2016	20?	
14/10/2016	10	18
15/10/2016	3	13
16/10/2016	40	49
17/10/2016	10	50
Total	170+	420



The Russian MOD claims its aircraft are only attacking military targets and produced video imagery to show the tracking of rebel fighters by drones before they are attacked from the air.
Source: Russian MOD briefing 13th Oct 2016



Zones of ground combat or uninhabited areas, representing nearly 50% of coverage of Russian and SyAAF air strikes

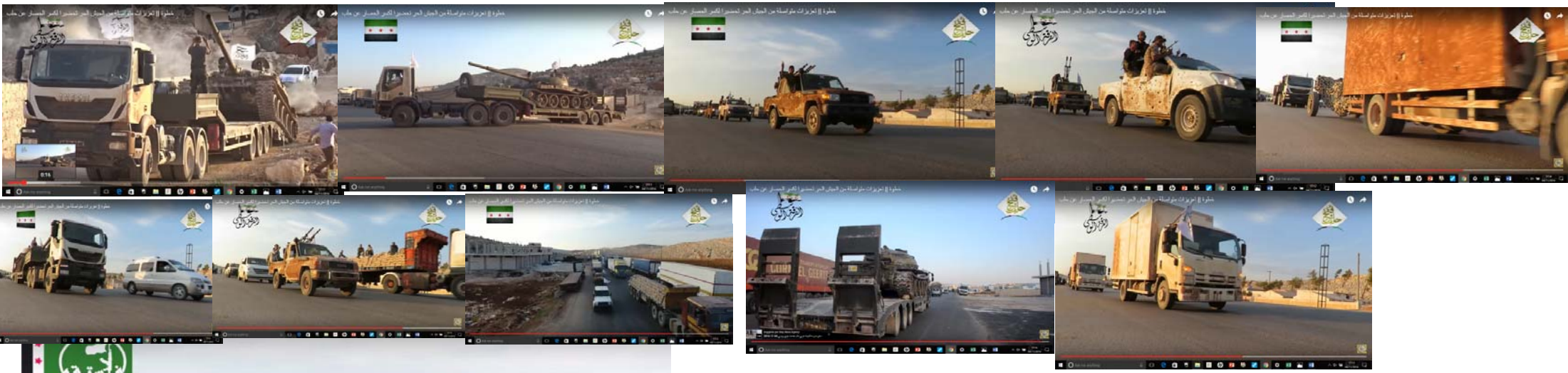


Russian air strikes in Aleppo, Ru MOD briefing 13th Oct 16

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Rebel Forces mass in Idlib province for the Battle to Lift Siege of Aleppo, 22 - 24 Oct 16

Rebel Column begins road move north to Aleppo in late Oct 16. Note move takes place in broad daylight, in perfect weather for aerial surveillance. Russian MOD on 21 Oct 16 reported that 1,200 rebels and 120 vehicles, including tanks were heading to Aleppo. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2eiVwFedzE>



Rebel unit parades before heading to Aleppo, 22nd Oct 16
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2eiVwFedzE>

Rebel force had terrible OPSEC that alerted the Syrian army that they were about to be attacked.

Did the Syrians know the rebel counter-attack was coming?

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This photo taken in the office of the Syrian commander in Aleppo, SRG Major-General Zaid Saleh, on 25th Oct 16 shows expected rebel offensive and the future Syrian offensive operations

Source: [@Souria4Syrians](#)

Operation Dawn of Victory Battle Plan

Note: Syrian and allied forces had no intention of launching a direct or all out frontal assault on the heavily populated urban area of eastern Aleppo.

- 3rd Phase: continue push rebels back away from western outer siege lines (mid November)
 - 4th Phase: seize rural, industrial and unpopulated areas along the eastern edge of Aleppo city, to pen the remaining population and rebel fighters tightly into urban areas without means to grow food or water sources. (late November)
 - 5th Phase: break up rebel held eastern Aleppo enclave into a series of smaller pockets, which are considered more than likely to surrender and volunteer for "evacuation". (December)
- AIM to clear out eastern Aleppo of rebel fighters by the end of December



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Syrian Tiger Force capture of Halwaniyah Youth Housing Project, 30 Nov 16

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ztc7mXcfekc>

Tiger Force soldiers and dead rebels inside the Housing Project, 1 Dec 16
Source: [@IvanSidorenko1](#)
A video on [@IRGC_QF](#) showed 7 dead rebels at this location



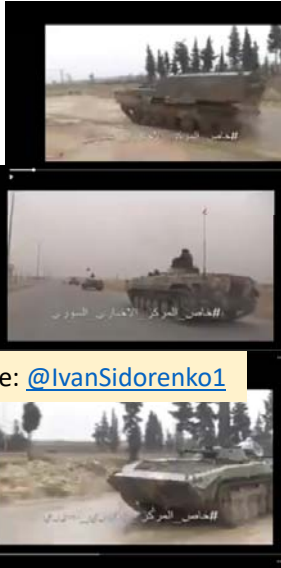
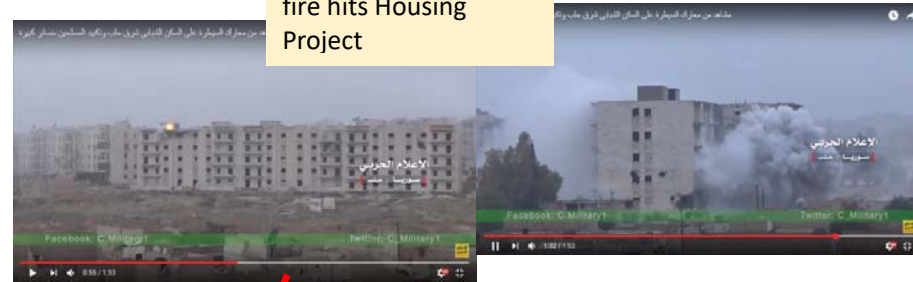
Ground assault moves to objectives, after being delivered by APCs



Source: [@IvanSidorenko1](#)

Syrian army assault met very light resistance – opposition fighters withdrew rather than fight

Syrian Tank and AAA fire hits Housing Project



Source: [@IvanSidorenko1](#)



Syrian Axis of Advance

Syrian Tank and AAA fire supports ground assault

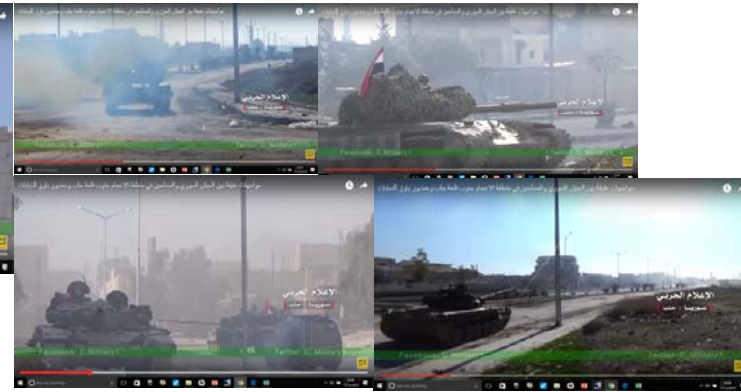


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Markings Of 154th Brigade, 4th Mech Div T-90 tanks



Syrian Axis of Advance



Syrian Axis of Advance



Operation in Al Qasilih district, 9 Dec 16
Source:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07ik8JqM1pY&feature=youtu.be>

154th Brigade, 4th Division Operation in Sawf al Dawla district, 9 Dec 16
Source:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_y8sF7do0&feature=youtu.be



Captured men of fighting age in eastern Aleppo (location unknown) 9 Dec 16
Source:
[@IvanSidorenko1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_y8sF7do0&feature=youtu.be)



These are the only pictures of prisoners in government hands during the siege

Population Movements in Aleppo-Idlib Region, 15-22 Dec 2016

The evacuations were carried out on a fleet of more than 50 "green painted" buses of the Syrian State Bus Company

Source: Getty



Source: Getty



Source: Aleppo 24



Source: AP/sputnik



Green buses set on fire by rebel fighters outside government controlled Foua and Kefraya enclaves, 18 Dec 16
Source: Al Manar TV



Some evacuees moved to Idlib from Aleppo in their own vehicles.
Source ICRC

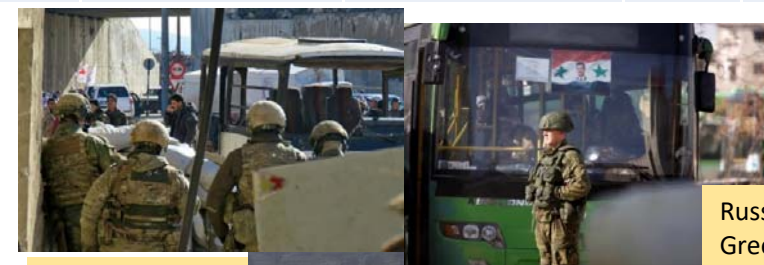
The evacuations were Co-ordinated by officers from the Russian Centre for Reconciliation in the Syrian Arab, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Syrian Red Crescent.

Civilians and Fighters evacuated from rebel Eastern Aleppo enclave to Edlib, under supervision of ICRC

Source: ICRC	Total	including fighters
15/12/2016	1,200	
16/12/2016	7,300	3,000
19/12/2016	5,000	
20/12/2016	16,500	
21/12/2016 ??		
22/12/2016		
Total	34,000	4,000

Evacuated from Foua and Kefraya to Government controlled Aleppo, under supervision of ICRC

Source: ICRC	
15/12/2016 ??	
19/12/2016	500
20/12/2016	750
21/12/2016 ??	
Total	1,250??



Russian Special Forces Soldiers monitor evacuations
Source: Daily mail

Russian soldier with Green Bus.
Source: Reuters



Russia officers organise Green buses. Note Gaz Tigr vehicle. Source: SANA

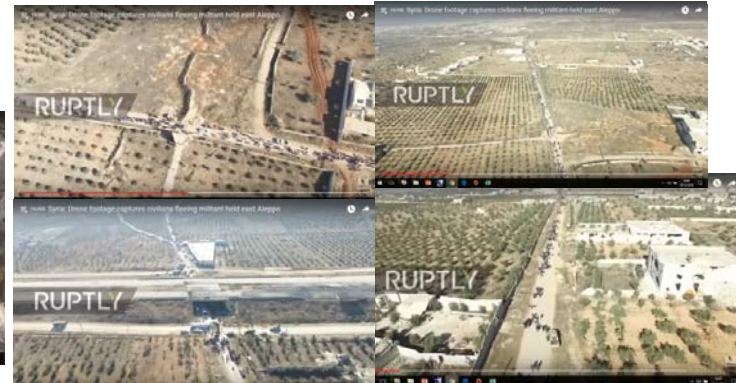
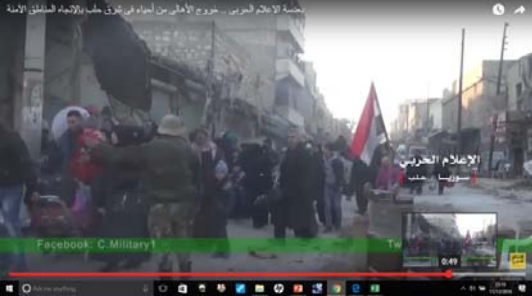
Civilian Refugees from East Aleppo

108,076 civilians, including 47,183 children had entered government controlled territory since 27th November, with 3,033 fighters surrendering to government troops
 Source: Lt. Gen. Viktor Poznikhir of Russian General Staff, 15 Dec 16

Civilian Refugee Flows from Eastern Aleppo Enclave into government territory and Surrenders of rebel fighters, 18 Nov - 14 Dec 2016

Source: Russian MOD/SANA

	Civilians (incl children)	Surrendered Fighters	Running Refugee Total
27/11/2016	10,000		
	6,000 to Kurdish suburb		
28-31/11/16	8,500		
	2,000 to Kurdish suburb		
03/12/2016			30,000 total fled enclave
04/12/2016		150	
08/12/2016	10,500 (4,000)	30	
09/12/2016	8461 (2934)	1096	
10/12/2016	20,000		1217 50,000 total fled enclave
11/12/2016	10,127 (1007)	1615	
12/12/2016	13,341 (5831)		728 100,000 total fled enclave
13/12/2016	8,000 (4,000)	366	
14/12/2016	6,000		
cumulative total	102,929	5,202	
Revised total	108,076		3,033 from Russian MOD, 15/12/16



Refugees leaves, southern sector of Aleppo "pocket" 10 Dec 16

Source:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rreLsXYxkV8&feature=youtu.be>

© timripley@hotmail.com

Civilians return to government controlled Aleppo, 12 Dec 16

Source:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1iVxmsbVhw&list=PLeIzHhBSrVlack4XAxzQkbiIffCltb>

Refugees leave Bab Nayreb district and walk to southern ring road, as filmed by RT drone, 11 Dec 16

Source:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQiBpuWcnEY&index=19&list=PLeIzHhBSrVlack4XAxzQkbiIffCltb>

13th December 2016

The UN's human rights office announced it had received reports that 82 civilians had been killed across four different neighbourhoods. "The reports we had are of people being shot in the street trying to flee and shot in their homes," Rupert Colville, a UN spokesman, said. "There could be many more."

Jens Laerke, another UN spokesman, said it looked like there had been a "complete meltdown of humanity" in the city.

UN Human Rights Council, 27 February Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic into Battle of Aleppo

Its assessments included:

Air Strikes on hospitals

38 killed in eastern Aleppo hospital attacks

Indiscriminate attack on Civilians

34 killed in west Aleppo by rebel fire

Water supply as weapon

Government bombed pumping stations, rebels turned off water to west Aleppo

Chemical Weapon use

Chlorine bombs dropped from government helicopters, 2 dead and 145 injured

Massacres and Abuses during evacuation by Government Forces

6 humanitarian workers arrested, 7 civilian residents arrested, 200 men forcibly conscripted, 2 relatives of fighters shot, four wounded fighters executed



11 January 2017

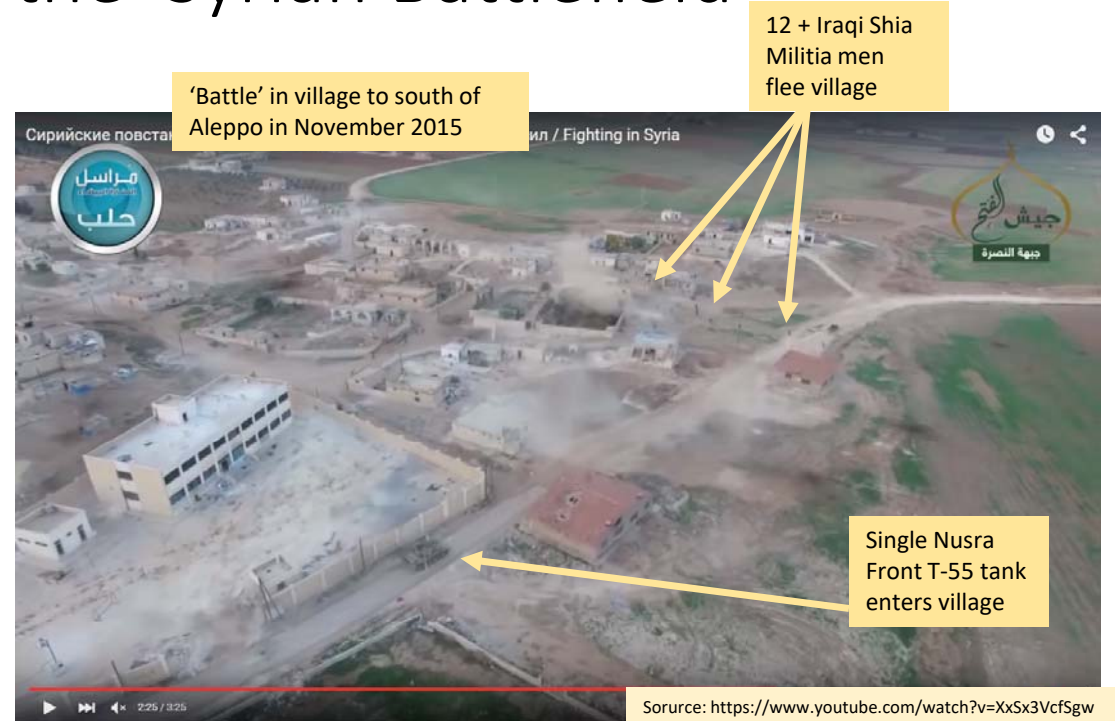
Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary- General

nearly 150,000 people from eastern Aleppo in Syria have been displaced from. More than 36,000 of them were evacuated to the western countryside of Aleppo and Idlib governorate and more than 111,000 people to different areas in Aleppo city.

Conclusion 1 – the Nature of the Syrian Battlefield

The Syrian War has some unique characteristics that have led to the rival forces to adapt to the organisation and tactics to keep fighting after six years of war:

- Much of Syria is what is termed an “empty battlefield”. The military units engaged are all relatively small, measured in low hundreds at the top end. A battle in Syria is “big” if more than a couple of hundreds troops are involved, on rival sides. Often less than 20 combatants are killed in typical Syrian “battles”.
- Syria’s diverse terrain, means fighting takes places in urban, desert, mountain, village, forest and agriculture environments.
- All sides in the conflict have “long war strategies”. They have to keep their armies and populations fighting, year in year out. So they put great effort into maintaining morale of their troops and keeping them fighting, including manning the frontline in “shifts” and avoiding all out infantry assaults that might result in heavy casualties.
- Much of the military activity in Syria is carried out for propaganda purposes or to boost the morale of troops or populations. It has little “military “ utility.
- None of the participants adhere to the Laws of Armed Conflict or other humanitarian norms of behaviour BUT they are not worried about hiding their behaviour



Source: @IvanSidorenko1



Source: SANA



Source: @bm21_grad



Source: SANA



Source: SANA

Conclusion 2

- Finding “facts” in the Syria conflict is very difficult – even with the huge amounts of information available
- Syria armies are fighting a war that is very different from the way it is presented to the outside world
- Every piece of information from Syria needs to be rigorously challenged – the obvious facts can not be taken for what they seem
- Aleppo was a battle for “hearts and minds” of city’s population. The perception of the battle very different in Syria compared to that in outside world.



Prefab buildings

Helicopter landing pads
 2 x H-60 & 1 x CH-47
 1 x H-60
 2 x V-22

2 x H-60 &
 1 x CH-47 helo
 Helo maintenance
 shelters

m images, June 2016

Terraserver.com images,
 29 Jan 17

US Forward Operating Base
 at Lafarge Cement Plant,
 northern Syria
 © timripley@hotmail.com



- NOTES:
1. From the size of the helicopter landing pads this site could host up to 20 assorted helicopters
 2. From the number of buildings this site could hose several hundreds troops