

Limb Salvage(less) Surgery in the Syrian Civil War
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The United Nations has called the conflict in Syria “the greatest humanitarian tragedy of our times,” and UN officials have said that they are “running out of words” to describe the horrors inside Syria¹. What started as a peaceful protest in March 2011 has led to 4 years of an escalating conflict in which an estimated 220,000 people have been killed. Over 12 million Syrians—one-half of the country’s population—needed humanitarian aid in 2014². Innocent, noncombatant civilians are paying the largest price, and humanitarian workers—including orthopedic surgeons—have been risking their lives to help them.

Both government forces and extremist militias have committed crimes against civilians and civilian infrastructures³. The use of chemical weapons and napalm on civilians, the decimation and mass starvation of civilian populations through conventional warfare, the denial of medical care and humanitarian aid, the murder of doctors, and the destruction of schools, bakeries, and hospitals—all of these actions have been systematic and deliberate⁴. They have been conducted as a matter of policy and military strategy to achieve a tactical advantage.

A collapsed health-care system further complicates the situation. 60% of public hospitals and 78% of public ambulances are damaged or out of service. Thousands of health-care personnel have fled the country for their safety, and hundreds have been arrested and tortured. As of July 2013, only 250 of 6000 physicians remained in Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, to serve a population of 2,500,000.

Over the past 3 years, sustained bombardments and intense fighting have transformed the civilian and residential neighborhoods of Aleppo into a battlefield. As a result, medical work in these areas has been driven underground where doctors and nurses operate in secret, makeshift, provisional facilities such as caves, farms, and apartment buildings. They do so under the threat of arrest or execution if they are caught treating “the other side” and for adhering to principles of medical neutrality. Massacres and mass casualty events have unfortunately become a daily routine. Despite horrifying conditions, Syrian medical and humanitarian workers are risking their lives to save lives.

I am an orthopedic oncologist who volunteered with the Aleppo City Medical Council in an underground hospital in Aleppo in August 2013 and April 2014 as well as with Doctors without Borders (MSF) in a field hospital in Ramtha, Jordan in July 2014.

This presentation will give a glimpse into what life is like for orthopedic surgeons in an underground field hospital under siege in Aleppo where snipers fire at the rooftop and barrel bombs land meters from its doorstep. It will demonstrate how with basic techniques and very limited resources orthopedic surgeons are able to save lives and limbs. It will also focus on

1. amputations and attempts at limb salvage in the humanitarian war setting
2. management of wounds caused by high-energy barrel bombs
3. principles in the management of war wounds in the hostile, limited-resource environment according to International Committee of the Red Cross guidelines

References

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2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Stories from Syrian refugees. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php>
3. United Nations Commission <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx>

4. Brundtland GH, Glinka E, zur Hausen H, d'Avila RL. Open letter: let us treat patients in Syria. *Lancet*. 2013 Sep 21;382(9897):1019-20.