In the News *is an online column of the Center for Civilians in Harm's Way. It is focused on violent actors and events— and a question seldom raised in the headlines: what if anything was done to help local civilians survive alone in the face of inexorable atrocities?*

In the News

How to Help Aleppo?

How to Help Aleppo? Help Aleppo help itself. Years ago. That's plan B. And of course continue everything else that we on the outside have been trying to do for those still in Aleppo, albeit without much success. That's Plan A.

It is not too late to ask: what steps for self-preservation have civilians in Aleppo taken? How did we or how could we support those steps? It is not too late because the worst may be yet to come.

It is a matter of praise, not blame, to ask what residents of that city have done to help themselves. Undoubtedly, they have attempted many of the measures described in this column. In every conflict and culture across time, civilians devise remarkable strategies and structures by which to survive unstoppable violence. As noted in the Center's report, *How Civilians Survive Violence*, some of these strategies have by themselves saved millions of lives without outside assistance.

This praise must not err on the side of romanticizing. The late Fred Cuny once observed that endangered civilians "make choices for some purpose and we must understand those purposes. [But… many people] simplify complex decisions by relying on habit, instinct, simple cues, and trial and error." [1] Habit, instinct and simple cues can turn obsolete when violence reaches new thresholds. Trial and error is a deadly way to learn that the rules have changed.

Nor should this praise be treated as an excuse. We are not released from our duty to help by noting that at-risk populations have tremendous capacity to fend for themselves. Quite the opposite. This knowledge is now our burden: how do we reinforce this clear potential of theirs for self-help? Trial and error has a lethal learning curve. Yet lessons are percolating up from the rubble of Aleppo and other Syrian cities. Likewise, hard-earned lessons have also emerged from yesterday's conflicts elsewhere. What listening, sharing, and resourcing have we given all these lessons so that Aleppo's residents could shorten their lethal learning curve?

Outside support for Aleppo's hospitals and emergency responders is well known and admirable. Now, what more is being, or can be, done?

Listed below are dozens of generic actions covering ***safety*** as well as life-critical ***sustenance*** and ***services***. They are global options and perhaps many of them are ill-suited for the local context of Aleppo. But if even just a handful of them are suitable and as yet untried, then is it not urgent to at

least consider them in the fifth year of a war with no end in sight? The residents of Aleppo have *already* tried a number of these steps openly and likely many others in secret as well. The question for us is—to what degree are we supporting or even aware of such steps?

Safety

Nothing here is meant to suggest that a population under siege can be made appropriately safe. The residents of Aleppo are being besieged and bombarded in ways that constitute war crimes. In response, what have they done—and what have we supported—that makes them somewhat safer?

<u>Safer Sites</u>
- Families, factories, bakeries, markets, mosques, schools, etc. shifted underground?
- Blast walls, trenches, pits, tunnels, bunkers, and cellars built?
- Acquired the engineering expertise and earth-moving tools or equipment to build even more?
- Rubble used for shelter and concealment?
- Sniper targeting degraded by obstructing line of sight? By shifting activity to night time?
- Spotter, pilot, or drone targeting degraded by:
    - Decoys (false exterior structures, fake equipment, skeletal vehicles, lights simulating target of interest at night, etc.)?
    - Disinformation about target locations or value?
    - Intermittent movement of possible targets?
    - Underground construction?
    - Camouflage?
    - Smoke screens created by smudge pots or burning of tires, oil, etc.?
- Early warning and response maximized by optimal use of information, communication, and threat response?

<u>Information</u>
- Earlier warning via:
    - Eavesdropping of unencrypted military traffic (using commercially available scanners)?
    - Deeper spotter network of observation or listening posts, paid informants, sympathizers within sight or earshot of scrambling aircraft, family members embedded in the Syrian Air Force, etc.)—combined with faster response (via enhanced communications)?

<u>Communication</u>
- Multilayered communication ranging from low-tech signaling, alarms, and couriers to high-tech e-platforms, the latter run on off-the-grid power sources?
- Warning effectively wired to threat response mechanisms?

<u>Threat Response</u>
- Attack response organized down to neighborhood, block, and family level?
- Rehearsal in proper threat response to varied threats: reaction upon contact with different forms of incoming fire (sniper, artillery and aerial bombardment—barrel bombs, sarin gas—etc.) as well as mines, IEDs and UXOs?
- Protective strategies and tactics specific to women, children, draft-age males, and elderly?
- Broad-based sharing of self-protection tactics?
- Flight as a threat response:

- Clarity: intelligence forewarn siege would tighten to the point that staying in situ is no longer preferable to flight?
- Capacity: costs of flight? (See below the references to "assets" which affect one's ability to pay for costs of flight.)
- Capacity: brokered safe passage?
  - Cut deals, pay bribes, or make appeals to soldiers surrounding city?
- Capacity: safe movement?
  - Stolen or counterfeited forms, cards, and stamps for false identity or "safe passage" documents?
  - Optimized travel group size, formation, and composition?
  - Route selection scouted or tested?
  - Skills for living off the land (acquiring minimum of food, water, shelter)?
  - Agreed-upon rally points to reunite if necessary?
  - Map and grid coordinate reading and other forms of orienteering?
  - Familiarized with off-road travel?
  - Familiarized with night travel?

Life-Critical Sustenance

In most conflicts, the collapse of life-critical sustenance takes more lives than direct physical violence. The residents of Aleppo are facing heightened restrictions on their access to life-essential sustenance; starvation is being used as a weapon of war which, again, constitutes a war crime. In March 2016, Save the Children urged that we "increase investments that support self-sufficiency in the besieged areas." [2] In that regard, what have civilians done—and what have we supported—that makes them somewhat food secure?

Stockpile and Conserve Assets

- Did preemptive stockpiling take place?
  - Community granaries or silos (disguised from air, perhaps mobile)?
- Did every home hoard and hide caches of nonperishable food?
- Non-essential assets sold for food?
- Assets pooled, with risk spread out within affinity groups?
- Resources of every kind recycled, practices borrowed from past conflicts?
- Changes to diet:
  - Fewer and watered-down meals?
  - Inventive recipes and processes for preparation of nontraditional food?
- Food stock preservation (salted, smoked, dried, brined, canned) and protection (air-and-water tight storage; control of pest and insect damage)?

Adapt and Expand Assets

- Every canopy of the built-up urban infrastructure—subterranean, surface, and rooftop—used to full advantage in supporting subsistence?
  - Root cellars for vegetables and tubers?
  - Biodiverse agriculture scattered within neighborhoods already bombed out:
    - Adapt swidden-style farming to urban setting: multiple canopies—thus maximizing use of space and appearing less obvious from the air—of root crops, short-cycle crops, and even fruit trees?
  - Balconies and camouflaged rooftop plots of intensive gardening? (With vegetables selected for vitamin and micronutrient content?)

- - Seed brought in via tunnel smuggling?
    - Seed brought in via UAV airdrops:
        - Use of quiet, camouflaged craft; able to fly deck level with significant payload weight; able, with the help of supporters outside the besieged areas, to launch from points close enough for frequent flights; flying line-of-sight or preprogrammed routes to those on the inside who have coordinated and prepared landing zones, controlled reception and distribution?
    - Expansion of urban animal husbandry? (Poultry and small ruminants, hardy and low-maintenance?)
    - Innovations in water management (cited below) and homemade fertilizers and feeds to enhance these crop and livestock efforts?
- Optimized use of social networks? (Social norms and structures for sharing resources, sharing financial risk, collective laboring, hosting traditions, kinship exchange and reciprocity processes, and more?)
- Local lending and credit nodes? (Commercial or noncommercial loans; purchase on credit from merchants; local mobile money mechanisms?)
    - Modern finance and ICT mechanisms and "rewritten and underwritten" by traditional networks of trust and local dispute resolution mechanisms?
    - Enablers and infusions via external monetary relief (next)?
- External monetary relief—distance finance by aid agencies:
    - Expatriate agencies channeled deposits to trusted proxies to avoid government seizure of their bank accounts and keep monies close to the ground in light of pending evacuation?
    - Cash transfers, via formal or informal banking mechanisms, to:
        - Local service providers who then purchase and deliver goods?
        - Merchants who are contracted/subsidized to buy and deliver goods at an agreed-upon profit margin?
        - At-risk civilians (including host families) who are given cash directly to purchase goods?
    - Financing methods with outside aid agency as underwriter / guarantor, using its local staff or partners as intermediaries:
        - Cash vouchers (redeemable only by the authorized holder thus lessening the risk of carrying cash)?
        - Commodity coupons (that protect recipients from price inflation and currency devaluation)?
        - Promissory notes (with agreed-upon interest rate to incentivize local banks or lenders to keep lending and merchants to keep allowing purchase-on-credit)?
- Reimbursement to smugglers (vet in advance for least "problematic" partners; they sell at below black market rate and are reimbursed over it; payment upon confirmation of sale)?
- Remittances made conflict-resistant? (Transactions are shock-proofed against disruptions to communication and movement):
    - Fallback cash transfer agents?
    - Alternate or encrypted communication and courier systems?
    - Default secondary remittance destinations?
    - Proxies to do transactions?
    - Necessary documents for transaction safeguarded?
    - Smart, prepaid, or debit cards and mobile phone SIM cards to aid communication and transaction?
    - Collaboration with organized diaspora to facilitate both individual and collective (community) remittances?

- o   Waiver to international ("anti-terror") restrictions on informal banking?
- Black market?
    - o   Accommodate or avoid the most profit-seeking or violent smuggling networks?
    - o   Alternative networks and routes?
- Shadow and coping economies?
    - o   Support of "benign" activities (foraging for sale, marginal manufacture, begging, petty hoarding, petty smuggling, petty resource extraction, etc.) as alternatives to harmful activities (prostitution, drug dealing, illicit cultivation, protection rackets, robbery, etc.)?
- Shift livelihood to service work, especially that which meets needs spurred by conflict?
    - o   Cobbler-tinker-tailor type work (repairs, make warmer clothing, durable shoes, blankets, tarpaulins, soap, etc.); smiths and mechanics devise digging or earth-moving equipment; basic masonry; mail or calling services; informal currency exchange; entrepreneurial work to bridge damaged public services and infrastructure, etc.?
- Cross-line trade? (Deals or pay-offs between soldiers or civilians on either side of the conflict's "front line" to facilitate commerce?)

Strip, Convert, or Transfer Assets

- Redeem assets? (Collect debts or rent due; withdraw savings, loans, or shares locked up in an enterprise?)
- Liquidate assets?
    - o   Assets converted into portable, protectable, or concealable currency such as small amounts of gold, silver, or jewelry?
    - o   Assets exchanged (sold, pawned, or put up as collateral) for cash?
    - o   Reverse remittance: cash is mailed, wired or electronically transferred to safe repositories or trusted relations elsewhere?
- Dismantle assets? (Strip, bury, or sell roofing, fixtures, and other building materials?)
- Transfer assets? (Preemptive transport of portable possessions to safer locations?)

Life-Critical Services

In most conflicts, the collapse of life-critical services takes more lives than does direct physical violence. In that regard, what have local providers and civilians done—and what have we supported—to keep these services somewhat functional?

- Local providers retrofitted and remotely supported? [†]
    - o   Foreign aid organizations lay groundwork for an ethical duty of care (salary? critical benefits coverage? policy on risk-taking?) for their local staff and partners before pulling out of Aleppo?
    - o   Foreign aid organizations lay groundwork for remote support of local staff and partners (distance consultation, distance resourcing, distance monitoring and evaluation, and distance humanitarian intelligence) before pulling out of Aleppo?
    - o   Local providers adopt a low profile for service delivery?
        - ▪   Deconstruct architecture of aid service delivery and "dissolve" into the city: downgrade identity; downsize infrastructure; disperse, monetize or outsource supplies; disperse staff; disperse beneficiaries; and delegate work?
    - o   Local providers adopt field craft suited to that discreet, mobile workplace?

[†] The *Center for Civilians in Harm's Way* has inventoried tactics by which local providers can retrofit their work in the face of violence and by which international organizations can better remotely support them.

- ▪ Conflict-adjusted information handling, communication, movement and threat response?
- Priority Sector—Health:
  - o Further disperse, hide, and fortify hospitals, clinics and pharmacies?
  - o Ramp up smuggling and black market (via bribes, tunnels, etc.) of medical supplies, equipment, water purification, apparatus for cold-chain storage, micro nutrients and vitamins, etc.?
  - o Substitute medical supplies (homemade IV bags, ORT solution, bandages, etc.)
  - o Waive medical costs; outside patrons compensate providers for loss?
  - o Incentivize émigré medical personnel to return to Aleppo?
  - o Local health workers link with outside expertise via telemedicine?
  - o Hire university students to teach as medical paraprofessionals through faster, more flexible certification?
  - o Initiate "teacher of volunteers" programs for medical personnel, health workers, midwives, etc.?
  - o Provide search and rescue teams more medical training and equipment?
  - o Put medical and health workers on "mobile circuits" to reach more locations?
  - o Create volunteer networks and mass multi-media information campaigns about preventive health, sanitation, basic first aid, and rudimentary surgical fixes?
    - ▪ Use of informal pedagogies (such as landmine awareness and disaster preparedness messaging) as well as high-tech ones to reach wide swaths of Aleppo's residents with health messages?
  - o Traditional prophylaxes and medicines, traditional healers, traditional birth attendants, etc.?
  - o Socially and spiritually-based coping mechanisms for psychosocial trauma?
  - o Community contacts and networks for temporary fostering or adoption?
  - o Community contacts and networks for widows?
  - o Recreation and diversion for all ages?
- "Work-arounds" for damaged public utilities and infrastructure:
  - o Cash transfers to *spur entrepreneurial activity* and *cottage industries* that establish stop-gap measures in all of the following critical areas:
  - o Water
    - ▪ Water "taxi" transport?
    - ▪ Water treatment teams?
    - ▪ Safeguarding of public water from attack or contamination?
    - ▪ Construction teams to repair or disguise water towers, cisterns, pipes and reservoirs?
    - ▪ Widespread installation of hand pumps?
    - ▪ Neighborhood-based low-tech water catchment, shallow wells, or dams; water treatment at points of consumption?
    - ▪ Acquisition and stockpiling of chlorine for water treatment?
    - ▪ Acquisition and distribution of fuel for boiling water?
  - o Sanitation
    - ▪ Garbage removal?
    - ▪ Construction teams to repair, contain, or treat sewage systems?
  - o Energy: Electricity
    - ▪ Makeshift turbines (wind and water)?
    - ▪ Hand crank, foot pedal, or diesel generators; truck battery pods; electricity kiosks, etc.?

- Solar panels?
- Methane gas from animal waste?
  - Energy: Fuel for motors
    - Early stockpiling and concealment of fuel reserves?
    - Burning plastics for oil derivatives?
  - Energy: Fuel for cooking
    - More fuel-efficient cook stoves?
    - Solar powered cookers?
    - Less fuel-intensive dietary alternatives?
  - Banking and finance.
    - Stabilize and expand the non-formal credit, lending, and remittance activity cited above?
  - Telecommunications
    - Freelance phone and internet services along the Somali "failed state" model (including entrepreneurial startups like Hormmud and Golis)?

It is not too late to prepare

Yes, the conflict has been raging for five years. Yes, hundreds of thousands have died and many more fled. Yes, all the strategies cited above would have been easier at the beginning when civilians' resources and resilience were stronger. But, No, it is not too late to prepare these tactics because the worst may be yet to come.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that Syria's most dangerous days are still ahead of her. She might emerge drastically different than the state known since 1946. The internal and external parties to this conflict may shift—but another five years from now the violence could still be ongoing with worse rates of mortality. There has been a sharp acceleration in the targeting and collapse of the health care system and in the decline of food security. Quite easily the day may come when malnutrition and disease rake through civilians far more devastatingly than barrel bombs. The population is not prepared for this. And there are still 100,000 children trapped in Aleppo.

The two "good" pieces of news in all of this are: there are strategies that can work and there are organized Syrians on the ground who can deploy such strategies—with even just a modicum of outside support. That is, there exists a viable process and a viable platform by which to prepare for an even worse case-scenario.

Preparedness Support

One process by which to identify, implement, and resource self-protection strategies is called "Preparedness Support." Dozens of the best and brightest in the aid world have long since concluded that we as an aid community must do more to support local capacity to survive alone before we lose meaningful influence or access. Preparedness Support doctrine, described by the *Center for Civilians in Harm's Way*, is perhaps the most systematic reply to that call.

The White Helmets

Of the varied organized groups of Syrians on the ground in Aleppo and elsewhere, one stands out. It is the Syria Civil Defense, more popularly known as the White Helmets. Compared to many other organizations, the White Helmets have been able to steer an impartial and independent course. More significantly, they have thousands of volunteers in eight provincial directorates—and have earned an astounding level of recognition and trust among the population.

The primary mission which has gotten them this far has been urban search and rescue. There is no other unarmed entity in the country that has contributed more to *safety*. Now the question becomes, will the White Helmets be able to deal with what may become (as it does in most conflicts) an even bigger killer: the collapse of life-critical *sustenance* and *services*? One recent report concludes that, "As a result of the trust they built with communities over the years, the White Helmets can be a reliable entity to deal with the many challenges that Syrians face today and in the future." [3]

The White Helmets might aspire to meet those broader challenges. Their mission documents cite the need for "risk education, life-saving information, and community engagement"—which are basic strategies of preparedness. More fundamentally, they assert their "core belief is that the most resilient communities are those that are able to help themselves." [4]

The population of Aleppo has already shown remarkable resilience. But now deadlier thresholds with worse threats may be coming and nobody spontaneously "knows" how to deal with them: they must learn. Thus a proven, trusted group on the ground like the White Helmets might be able to help civilians shorten their deadly learning curves.

But the White Helmets are busy 24/7 pulling people out to the rubble. A high proportion of them are killed undertaking this service alone. Even if they want to face the broader challenges, would they have the wherewithal to absorb an expanded mission? Maybe the answer depends upon the amount of wherewithal that outside patrons are willing to provide them? Maybe the answer depends upon the resolve of you, the reader?

The future of Aleppo—and future Aleppo's

Nor is it too late to prepare for the next Aleppo. There are some four million Syrians now living in 135 areas officially designated "hard to reach." Since those sites are not yet fully besieged, might there be more opportunity to undertake some of the many tactics cited in this paper? Will we turn to a Plan B in those places—or stay with the Plan A we have been using for five years in Syria?

Beyond Syria, beyond today, there will always be more violent actors and events—for which we cannot claim to be prepared. Where will be the next Darfur, Rwanda, or Bosnia; the next Grozny or Aleppo? Who will be the next Khmer Rouge? Lord's Resistance Army? Interahamwe? Islamic State? Janjaweed? Boko Haram? Arkan's Tigers? Or D'Aubuisson's death squads? The passage of time will always bring us more of them.

The future is about learning from history. And it is about being on the right side of history while it is happening. The question: What did we do or fail to do while the first draft of history was being written the newspapers? For just as surely as atrocity is in the news today, it will be in the news again tomorrow.

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[1] Barry N. Stein and Frederick C. Cuny, *The Contemporary Practice of Voluntary Migration: Repatriation during Conflict, Reintegration amidst Devastation*, Michigan State University and the Center for the Study of Societies in Crisis, 22 February 1994; p. 9.
[2] *Childhood Under Siege: Living and Dying in Besieged Areas of Syria*, Save the Children, March 2016; p. 25.
[3] *Waiting for No One: Civilian Survival Strategies in Syria*, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), 2016; p. 30.
[4] Found at: http://www.maydayrescue.org/.