

Aleppo siege ends with the city back under control of Syrian government

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Damascus: The Syrian army said it has retaken full control of Aleppo, marking a major turning point in the country's five-year civil war.

A Syrian army soldier places a Syrian national flag during a battle with rebels

The remaining opposition fighters and civilians were busted out of war-ravaged eastern districts, sealing the end of the rebellion's most important stronghold.

À President Bashar al-Assad's troops and supporting militias entered eastern Aleppo by ground in late November. The regime and Russia -- its most powerful ally -- have decimated neighborhoods with airstrikes.

In a statement, the army said it had "returned security to Aleppo" and called it a "crushing blow" for rebels.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) confirmed "all civilians who wished to be evacuated have been, as well as the wounded and fighters".

This is the biggest victory for President Bashar al-Assad since the uprising against him began in 2011

The evacuations ended a brutal chapter in Syria's nearly six-year civil war, allowing President Bashar Assad to regain full authority over the country's largest city and former commercial powerhouse.

It marked his most significant victory since an uprising against his family's four-decade rule began in 2011.

"Thanks to the blood of our heroic martyrs, the heroic deeds and sacrifices of our armed forces and the allied forces, and the steadfastness of our people, the General Command of the Army and the Armed Forces announces the return of security and stability to Aleppo," an army general said in the statement.

Western Aleppo erupted in heavy celebratory gunfire, with Syrian TV showing uniformed soldiers and civilians shouting "Aleppo, Aleppo!" and "God, Syria and Bashar only!"

"No more east and west, Aleppo is back for all Aleppans," said the Syrian TV correspondent, surrounded by people waving Syrian flags.

For Syria's opposition, it was a crushing defeat that signaled the start of a new struggle to forge a way forward.

Ahmad al-Khatib, an opposition media activist who left the city before the siege, said the fall of Aleppo was a date "we'll never forget and we will never forgive."

"Let the world bear witness that Bashar Assad has killed and displaced and destroyed Aleppo, and he celebrates in his victory over the blood and offspring of Aleppo ... with the agreement of the Arab and Western nations," he posted on Twitter.

- AP inputs