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Issue 2017/01
January 2017

POLICY

BRIEF



Middle
East
Directions

On the Debris of Aleppo: A Gloomy and Uncertain Reconstruction for Syria. An analysis

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Executive Summary

The current military map that has emerged following the fall of Aleppo, and the gradual purging of dozens of rebel towns in Rif Damascus in 2016, is the culmination of dynamics that were initiated as early as in 2013. They were accelerated following Russia's direct military involvement in September 2015: the rise of Iranian and Russian presence on the ground; the disengagement of Gulf and Western countries; the gradual elimination of non-jihadist armed rebel forces; and the emergence of new spheres of influence (Turkish and Kurdish). Syria has in fact entered a new era, marked by the ultimate defeat of Syrian-Revolution forces that are now confined to increasingly narrow territorial pockets, and by the assertion of a new troika (Russia, Turkey and Iran) on both the military and diplomatic level. The conflict itself, however, seems to remain far from over.

The fall of Aleppo consecrates, above all, the failure of the non-jihadist rebel groups, which have been deeply divided over their positions towards Jahbat Fatah al Sham (ex-Jahbat al Nusra). The most recent military developments also mean a considerable



reduction in space and scope of action for the civilian opposition forces and, more broadly, they put the Syrian opposition in a critical position with limited choices.

Capitalising on their respective military successes in 2016, Russia and Turkey, and to a lesser extent Iran, are now at the epicentre of the diplomatic process (national ceasefire at the end of December, then Astana talks in January 2017). However, this new troika's ability to stabilise Syria remains uncertain. While Russia maintains ties of mutual dependence with its two regional partners, strategic discrepancies have already undermined the national ceasefire agreement and could jeopardise any effort to end the conflict. In addition, influence-sharing between the three stronger countries on the ground still remains unclear.

Above all, the ability of the new major players to administrate these newly controlled areas, in cooperation or in friction with the Syrian regime, may face at least three main challenges that could threaten to plunge Syria into further violence and chaos: the expansion of more radical jihadist groups, the persisting dispute over the Kurdish issue, and the hard-liner objectives and practices of the Syrian regime.

On the debris of Aleppo: A Gloomy and Uncertain Reconstruction for Syria¹

The fall of Aleppo in December 2016 by no means represents the Syrian regime's most important victory since the beginning of the uprising, but rather an assertion of Russian and Iranian authority in Syria. While the takeover of the city of Homs in 2014, and the gradual purging of dozens of rebel towns in Rif Damascus in 2016 through local "truce agreements", hold great strategic significance in maintaining and consolidating the vital heart of the Syrian regime,

1. The sources of this policy brief include around twenty interviews with Syrian opposition actors collected in Turkey between 5 and 19 December 2016, in addition to open-source data (until 19 January 2017, the time of writing).

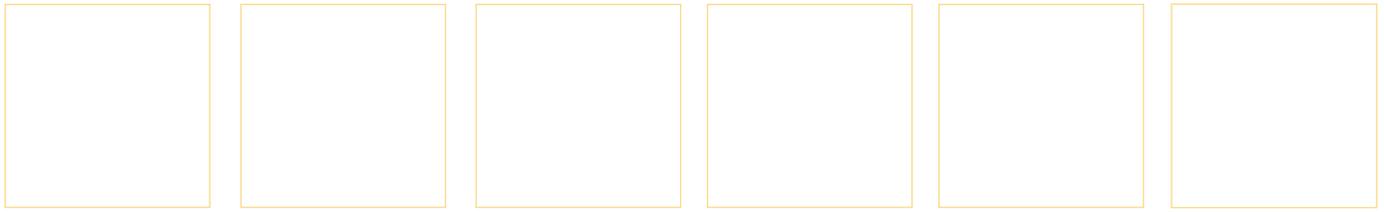
the fall of Aleppo is important for other reasons. It symbolises the ultimate defeat of the Syrian Revolution's civilian and military forces, which is the culmination of a series of dynamics initiated as early as the inaction of Western countries in response to the chemical attacks of 2013. These dynamics were further accelerated by Russia's direct military involvement in September 2015: the rise of Iranian, and then Russian, presence on the ground, in parallel with disengagement by Gulf and Western countries; the gradual elimination of non-jihadist armed rebel forces, which are now confined to increasingly narrow territorial pockets (Eastern Ghouta, a few localities in Idlib governorate, in the northern and western countryside of Aleppo and in the south of the country); the emergence of new spheres of influence (Turkish and Kurdish), which have yet to be stabilised and which are in competition in the struggle against the Islamic State.

1. The Aleppo Loss: Meanings For the Opposition

As the political opposition was almost hardly considered after the failure of Geneva 3 in February 2016, two main categories of opposition actors have remained at the forefront of the scene: armed groups and civil society organisations.

Ultimately, non-jihadist rebel groups, which constituted the overwhelming majority of forces in Eastern Aleppo, appear to be the biggest losers in the city. Above all, their swift defeat has been a result of the internal schisms that plagued the groups and stifled most of their attempts at planned offensives to break the Aleppo siege - imposed by the Syrian regime and its allies as of August 2016.² These internal divisions are not novel (for instance, the armed groups were never able to form a Joint Operations Command in Aleppo, unlike the situation in the Idlib governorate in 2015). The divisions have indeed intensified since

2. See "The Battles to Break the Siege of Aleppo: Military and Political Implications", Policy Analysis Unit- ACRPS, 22 August 2016. Youssef Sadaki, "The Political Moves Behind the Siege of Aleppo", Deeply Syria, 16 August 2016,.



the fall in 2016, precisely when the Syrian regime and its allies launched their last major offensive against Aleppo. Tensions have generally revolved around the positions of all rebel factions towards Jhabat Fatah al Sham (JFS). Disputes within the military-opposition arena have been largely influenced (from the beginning) by the US, UN and - of late - Turkey, pushing for the opposition's clear dissociation from JFS, in spite of al-Golani's announcement in the summer of 2016, claiming the severance of JFS ties with al Qaeda. The spectrum of Russian-American military coordination in the fight against JFS - under the terms of the agreement between the two states in September 2016 - has also played a role in intensifying internal disagreements. Moreover, these disputes reflect conflicts of power between warlords. For example, in early November 2016, local communities in Aleppo received a blow due to infighting between two major groups of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Eastern Aleppo, the Fastaqim Union and Nour al Din Al Zanki (which had recently moved closer to JFS), caused by personal divergences between their respective leaders. More importantly, the most powerful Islamist rebel group in Northern Syria - Ahrar al Sham - was torn apart during the last leadership elections, into a Turkish-baked "pragmatic" faction and hard-line rivals seeking a merger with JFS.³ Even if it seems unlikely that Ahrar al Sham's two factions would be ready to enter a fratricidal war, the tensions that have arisen have greatly reduced the rebel group's defensive capability during the battle of Aleppo.

For the majority of Syrian civil activists, the rebel brigades bear enormous responsibility for the Aleppo debacle, and have lost the confidence of the majority of the population. They appear unable to protect civilian populations and are "motivated solely to maintain

their power over miniscule portions of territory".⁴ The apparent paradox is the role that Russia and Turkey assigned to these armed groups immediately after their defeat in Aleppo. The armed groups were summoned by Ankara to sign the nationwide ceasefire declared on 29 December 2016, and were also placed at the centre of the Russian initiative to relaunch negotiations in the Astana talks (set to be held on 23-25 January)⁵.

On another level, the fall of Aleppo was a painful setback for Syrian civil activists, who have been forcibly evicted from the city. Around one hundred local Syrian organisations, often led by activists from West Aleppo, as well as 75 neighbourhood councils and the local city council were active in the city's eastern districts. The forced displacement of the entire population from these districts is therefore devastating for local civilian leaders, who had no choice but to take refuge in the western and northeastern countryside of the governorate, or further west in the Idlib region. The loss of Aleppo, and the new military map that is emerging today, implies a considerable reduction in space (and scope of action) for civil society organisations.

For many activists, the Idlib governorate, which in recent months has hosted many fighters and civilian cadres from the evacuated localities of Rif Damascus, is considered a "worst case scenario". On the one hand, Idlib remains a stronghold for JFS, which has not hesitated in obstructing the activities of several civil society organisations over the last two years. On the other hand, all observers anticipate one of the two following - but non-exclusive - scenarios in the coming months: a joint US-Russia counter-terrorism

3. Five members of the hardliner group suspended their membership and on 10 December 2016 announced the creation of a new faction within the movement, Jaish al Ahrar. See Aron Lund, *Divided, They may fall*, Carnegie Diwan, 14 December 2016.

4. Interviews by the author with local activists in Gaziantep, Turkey (5-19 December 2016).

5. As may be expected, the Astana talks once again divided the brigades gathered in Ankara by the Turks: nine brigades decided to attend it, as opposed to five who refused to go (especially Ahrar al Sham). See Ibrahim Hamidi, 17 January 2017, *Al Hayat* newspaper (in Arabic). After intense pressures from the Turkish side, thirteen brigades were on the final attendance list on 19 January 2017.



airstrike campaign to take back (or to destroy) Idlib; and/or fratricide infighting between armed groups, or in the words of a Syrian, who is very well-connected with armed groups in the area, “Idlib will be like a Gaza Strip, where armed groups will kill one another with only one border crossing point (Bab al Hawa)”⁶

In contrast to Idlib, the area spanning Azaz to Jarablous - or more broadly, the area of new Turkish influence - is perceived by many civil activists to be a last sanctuary, where they could pursue their activities and attempt to build a democratic alternative to both the Syrian regime and the Islamic State. In fact, ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’, launched on 24 August 2016 by the Turkish army in close coordination with some FSA brigades, has secured an area of 2000 square kilometres in Aleppo’s northern region. However, this area is far from entirely secure (a suicide attack took place in the main city of Azzaz on 7 January 2017). It still remains an area of military activity (which aims to take back the strategic city of Al Bab, see below), that has until now limited the establishment of new local structures across the area.

The fall of Aleppo is not the end of the political and armed opposition in Syria, but the last military developments (beyond of Aleppo) put them in a critical position with limited choices. Syrian opposition actors, as they acknowledged themselves, need to review their positions and strategies, and should generate new tools and mechanisms to address a new phase that is full of uncertainties.

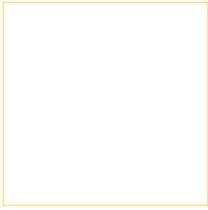
2. A New Troika to Stabilise Syria?

The forced evacuation of Aleppo was followed almost immediately by a tripartite announcement (Russia, Turkey and Iran) calling for a national ceasefire in 7 points at the end of December, and then a return to intra-

Syrian talks in Astana, Kazakhstan as of 23 January 2017. In fact, capitalising on their respective military successes in 2016, Russia and Turkey, and to a lesser extent Iran, had already monopolised the negotiations in Aleppo, from which the US and the UN had largely been excluded. Following the US’s temporary retreat during the electoral presidential campaign, and due to the EU’s weakness at the diplomatic and defense level, Russia has taken centre-stage in the process. Alongside its two regional partners, Iran and more recently Turkey, Russia maintains ties of mutual dependence. To impose ‘its peace’ or its own interpretation of the political transition, Russia could benefit from the widespread fatigue and disillusionment within the Syrian population. However, tactical discrepancies are palpable within this troika, which have already undermined the agreement of national ceasefire. They could increase in the medium term, depending on the still uncertain choices of the new US president’s policy.

The Russia-Turkey rapprochement seems at a glance to be the result of negative attitudes by both the US and EU towards Turkey, whose authorities felt increasing isolation, even betrayal, by Western countries in their management of the Syrian crisis (notably US disregard for Turkey’s primary strategic objectives in Syria), then concerning the coup attempt. The latter event has undoubtedly accelerated the redefinition of Turkish “national security” and marked a strategic shift in the Turkish government. In exchange for abandoning the city of Aleppo, Turkey would have obtained the green-light from Russia to lead ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’ to fight both IS and the Kurdish YPG. The objective has effectively been the establishment of a safe area under Turkish influence (corresponding roughly to that laid out by the Turks as early as 2014), which puts an end to the PYD project of linking the three Kurdish cantons in Northern Syria. However, the Turkish project requires the recapture of al-Bab, in which the Islamic State is still entrenched, and which appears a key city for both Turkey and the PYD, and possibly for the Syrian regime (stationed a few kilometers away). Yet, the battle of al-Bab is far more challenging than Turkey

6. In the past, intense clashes have already taken place in this area, such as those between Jahbat al Nusra and the Syria Revolutionary Front in 2014, or more recently, between Ahrar al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa in October 2016. On 19 January 2017, JFS launched a major offensive against some positions of Ahrar Al Sham in the Jisr-al-Choughour area.



and its affiliate Syrian armed groups had previously anticipated in mid-December. If the Turks originally knew that they would not be able to rely on US air support, they may have relied hastily, and excessively, on the Russians to recapture this strategic area and stymie the path of the Kurdish project. Erdogan's government, which is fragile on the domestic level and well-aware of the drastic reduction in its margin for maneuver on Syrian grounds, has interest, at least in the short term, in maintaining its agreement with Russia. Putin also needs Turkey to politically capitalise on its military gains in Syria (in this sense, the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara did not have any major negative consequences). The two countries nevertheless displayed divergent visions on the expectations of the Astana conference. While the Turks expressed their willingness to limit it to military actors, and to consolidate the truce, the Russians were more disposed to negotiating the details of a political resolution.

The relationship between Russia and Iran - the two main supporters of the Syrian regime since 2011 - is perhaps even more complex and obscure. In fact, pro-Iranian militias played a spoiler role in the implementation of the agreement to evacuate Aleppo's population, and imposed a new deal which included the evacuation of two Shia localities in the Idlib countryside in exchange for leaving Aleppo. The Syrian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah have also been at the frontlines of the more severe violations of the truce - of which Russia is one of two guarantors - in the region of Wadi Barada (north-west of Damascus), where the latest military campaign was launched on the 22 December and remained underway until 19 January (the time of writing). Breaches to the ceasefire that have also occurred in Eastern Ghouta, in Idlib and in Deraa in the South go to discredit the Russians (seen by the Syrian opposition as either enabled to be a guarantor or as playing a double-sided role) and could jeopardise any serious efforts to a sustainable political solution.

These recent events illustrate different approaches adopted by the Russians and the Iranians, and even

divergent strategic interests in the longer term. For the time being, the Russians have begun to take hold in economically strategic areas (through one military base in Hamamein near the port of Tartous for the control of economic trade, and one in Palmyra in the centre of Syria for the control of gas and oil fields, in addition to one big military base in Hama), and they bet on the reformation and reconstruction of a Syrian Army nucleus (through the founding of the 4th and 5th Corps). For their part, the Iranians rely mainly on Shiite militia (Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan) and Syrian paramilitary forces (the National Defense forces). They could have pleaded for forced displacement of Sunni populations from Central Syria (Rif Damascus and Homs) to the North (Idlib) to consolidate a Shi'ite buffer zone on the Lebanese border. They may also have a pipe-dream to expand to the South, but their intentions here are limited by the Israeli red lines (with the implicit agreement of the Russians). For many Syrians who have opposed the Syrian regime for six years, conquering Aleppo has been perceived as an immense victory for Iran first, but doubts remain over its ability to settle and rule in a "Sunni ocean".

Beyond preferential territories (the coastal zone for the Russians, the border area of Lebanon between Homs and Damascus for the Iranians, and the Turkish zone in the North), influence-sharing between the three stronger countries on the ground still remains unclear. Above all, their capacity to administrate these areas, in cooperation or in friction with the Syrian regime, may face major challenges.

3. Prospects for Syria: More Violence and Chaos

Following the recent geopolitical and strategic shifts, the Syrian regime and its allies, as well as several Western capitals, are expecting security and economic reconstruction to be paramount for the stakes of 2017. However, at least three main challenges threaten to plunge Syria into a situation of even greater violence and chaos than it has experienced thus far: the expansion of more radical jihadist groups, the continuing struggle



over the Kurdish issue, and the hard-liner objectives and practices of the Syrian regime.

The conclusion of the battle of Eastern Aleppo, which has been perceived by its inhabitants as a “Shiite Iranian invasion”,⁷ is likely to reinforce the most radical tendencies within Islamist groups, and to accelerate acts of bloody retaliation against the self-proclaimed victors. In the short and medium term, the Islamic State, which had not been a priority target for the Russians or the Iranians in Syria, could try to capitalise on the defeat of non-jihadist groups in Aleppo (The IS offensive on Palmyra and T4 airport in December 2016 probably aimed to polarise sympathies of a fringe among Sunnis). Jabhat Fateh al Sham, though weakened by its failures in Aleppo and by internal defections,⁸ remains the main military force in the Idlib governorate. Formally excluded from all the agreements in 2016 on ceasing hostilities, JFS also positions itself as the main bastion of resistance to the advances of the Syrian regime, and thus appears to be one of the primary local spoilers of the Russian-Turkish sponsored truce (as was the case in Wadi Barada). In the longer term, the fight against the Islamic state, JFS or other even more radical groups likely to emerge, has no chance of succeeding if the modalities of intervention by international actors are not redefined. In fact, the targeted-bombing tactic to eliminate the leaders of these jihadist groups cannot achieve any results without well-grounded support to the local civil actors and without a genuine Sunni reconstruction project capable of offering a political alternative to the majority of the Syrian population.

The fight against the Islamic state is further undermined by competition between Syrian armed groups (Arabs and Turkmen) supported by Ankara on the one hand, and the Syrian Democratic Forces dominated by the

Kurdish PYD and supported by the US on the other. It is unlikely that the new US administration will be quick to change its policy, unless it is convinced that the PYD project is primarily an Iranian one, as advocated by some Kurdish opponents of the PYD. So far, the US has insisted that the SDF will lead the battle of Raqqa, which is crucial not only in the fight against the Islamic State but also, and ultimately, over the ethnic-community balance in this area. If doubts are expressed about the ability of the PYD’s Kurdish forces alone to win a military battle for Raqqa, their ability to manage this vast rural area, characterised by strong Arab tribal structures, is likely to be problematic. The military involvement of PYD in non-Kurdish majority areas is likely to fuel further tensions between the two communities, anchored since the clashes in the Northern Aleppo governorate in late 2015.

Finally, the primary objective of the Syrian regime is to regain military control over most of the territory, through military escalation and/or agreements with local actors. In this context, the question of security and stabilisation seems crucial. It is at the epicentre of the ongoing Russian-Turkish negotiation process, whose main issue is the reconstruction of a Syrian national army. It is also at the core of local deals made by the regime and some opposition actors.⁹ Analysis of these local dynamics poses the hypothesis of a return to the security state (establishment of districts or entire cities in military zones, expansion of compulsory conscription, failure of the model of shared administration on security level), but also of its limitations (increase in the multitude of kidnappings and assassinations in several regions, empowerment and increased autonomy of paramilitary forces and Shiite foreign militias).

7. Interviews of the author with Aleppo residents in mid-December 2016. See also The Guardian, 29 September 2016 : <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/29/aleppo-attack-foreign-syrian-fighters-plan-shia-islamic>

8. Some of its leaders would be in favour of recreating a branch of al Qaeda in Syria, under the name Taliban al Sham, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/32081/Taliban_Sham_A_New_Branch_Al_Qaeda_Syria

9. See, for example, a case study by The Unit, about Wadi Barada, Analytical Overview, 17 January 2017, Beirut.

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