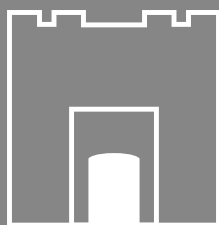


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

JANUARY - FEBRUARY

2016

ALEPPO
CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

2016

JANUARY - FEBRUARY

BACK TO GENEVA

Following UN Security Council Resolution 2254, De Mistura announced the next round of Geneva Talks for 25 January. These negotiations were to start as indirect ones, with De Mistura shuttling between the delegations.¹

His first priority was to stop the violence. Clause five of Resolution 2254 called for the International Syria Support Group, primarily the United States and Russia, to help implement an immediate “cessation of violence.”² His second priority was to discuss the 18 month transitional period, which was still subject to various interpretations.³

The negotiation start-date slipped to 1 February. Despite significant international pressure and some acts of good will, several issues remained outstanding. Who would represent the opposition? Was the Riyadh group enough? Would the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) come to the table after refusing to participate until the government released prisoners, stopped bombing and allowed humanitarian aid into besieged areas? Would Syria’s most influential Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Kurdistan (PYD) participate? And if so, how?

The HNC included a wide range of opposition groups, but excluded the PYD at the insistence of Turkey. Russia proposed creating a second opposition group to include the Kurdish party. Turkey objected and threatened to withdraw. To massage this issue, De Mistura invited a wide range of actors, but did not release the invitation list.⁴ In this way, the HNC could play the role of primary negotiator, but other voices could be incorporated on the margins of the talks.

Humanitarian access improved in early January.⁵ This was a welcome change after a very difficult 2015, during which the government only approved 13 of 113 requested aid convoys. As of 10 January, at least 400,000 people were under siege. Government forces besieged 42,000 people in Madamiyeh and 181,000 in Eastern Ghouta, Daraya and Zabadani. The opposition, including Jabhet an-Nusra (JN), held 12,500 residents of Foua and Kafraya under siege. The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) held another 200,000 under siege in Der al-Zor.⁶ On 11 and 15 January, humanitarian convoys entered the besieged towns of Madamiyeh, Foua and Kafraya.⁷ On 12-13 January, a deal was struck allowing aid into al-Waer, Homs allowing 700 people, including 300 rebels to leave the area.⁸

Although HNC representatives came to Geneva, they refused to leave the hotel. On 1 February, a spokesman said, “we are not here for negotiations, we are here to test the regime’s intentions” and if “there is no progress on the ground [stop the bombardment; release prisoners] we are leaving.”⁹

Besides humanitarian issues, the regime escalated its military campaign, especially in northern Aleppo.

On 1-2 February, government forces with Russian air support launched a new offensive to reach the besieged towns of Nubbul and al-Zahra. The opposition criticized the offensive.¹⁰ This was the breaking point. De Mistura “paused” the talks after three days and announced a three-week break.¹¹

Northern Aleppo Offensive

Under intensive Russian airstrikes, the Syrian Army, with the support of Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghan Shia militias, advanced in northern Aleppo towards Nubbul and al-Zahra on 1 February. Groups from the Islamic Front, al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh (The Levant Front) and Fatah Halab tried to repel them, but failed. The government reached the besieged towns within three days, during which the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (Syrian Observatory) estimated the Russian Air Force conducted 320 strikes.¹² The fighting continued until February 15 as the regime consolidated its gains. (See Map 33) This operation caused the exodus of more than 60,000 people¹³ from the region to near the Turkish border, which remained closed during the entire operation.

Meanwhile, JN sent troops to Aleppo to halt the regime advance and prevent a siege. On the frontlines north of Aleppo, JN’s military power was necessary to stop the regime from advancing. JN used this opportunity to strengthen its presence in the city.¹⁴

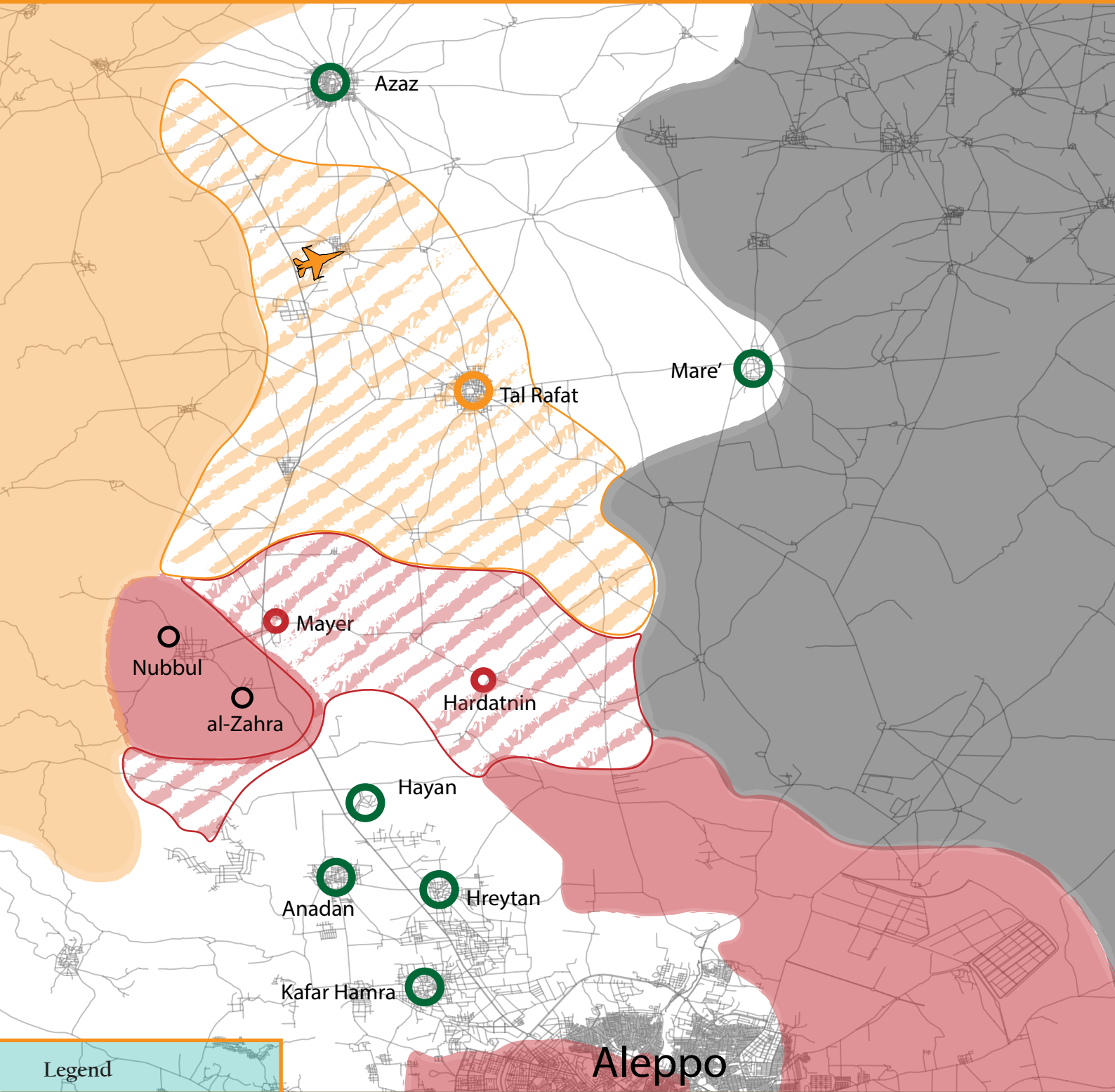
By mid-February, the regime had cut off the Kilis-Azaz-Aleppo supply line. Aleppians and the international community feared the regime would encircle Aleppo and starve the population into submission. As of late February, this had not happened.

The regime and the armed opposition were not the only actors. Another force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an all-Syrian group dominated by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units/Women’s Protection Unit (YPG/YPJ), but with Arab, Assyrian, Syriac and Turkmen members, also redrew its borders. The forces pushed east from its base in Afrin canton in early February under cover of Russian airstrikes. On 11 February, it captured the Minnegh Military Airbase from the opposition.¹⁵ This led Turkey to shell positions and cities inside Syria under Kurdish control.¹⁶ Despite the shelling, the SDF registered a second major gain when it pushed rebels out of their stronghold of Tal Rafat on 15 February. With these gains, the SDF took control of part of the Kilis-Azaz-Aleppo supply corridor and created a frontline with ISIS. (See Map 33)

BOX 12 : Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

The SDF, an all-Syrian group dominated by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units/Women’s Protection Unit (YPG/YPJ), but with Arab, Assyrian, Syriac and Turkmen members came into existence in October 2015. Kurdish militias had proven to be the most effective force fighting ISIS. Turkish objection and their connections to the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, have made it difficult for them to receive significant support. The second dominant group within the SDF is the Syrian Arab Coalition, a coalition of Sunni Arab fighters whose main enemy is Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS). SDF receives both weapons and air support in its war against ISIS from the international coalition.¹⁷

At the political level, the Kurdish PYD and some Syrian leftist secular groups comprise the bulk of the



Legend

- | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| | Area under government control before offensive (1 February) | | Key towns rebels lost to the government |
| | Territory gained by government (1-28 February) | | Key towns rebels lost to SDF |
| | Area under SDF control (1 February) | | Minnegh Airport, SDF control |
| | Territory gained by SDF (4-16 February) | | Key towns under opposition control |
| | Area under ISIS control (no major changes) | | |

Map 33: Northern Aleppo countryside (February 2016)

Sources: Compare with [Agathocle de Syracuse \(Map1\)](#); [Agathocle de Syracuse \(Map 2\)](#)

SDF's political wing, the Democratic Syrian Assembly. In this manner, the PYD, which has been excluded from Syrian peace talks, may gain an official seat at the table.

In a radical change, Haytham Manna, a prominent secular Syrian human rights activist, joined the alliance.¹⁸ Since the beginning of the conflict, he has rejected violence as a means for change. Manna, who has officially been excluded from international conferences, is well-connected and experienced in international politics. Throughout the conflict, he has kept channels open with the United States, the EU and Russia.

The PYD was not invited to the Riyadh opposition conference on 10 December. In response, it organized a conference for small parties in the northwestern Syrian town of al-Malikiyah and created the Syrian Democratic Council to represent military components of the SDF. At Turkey's request, the group was not invited to the 1 February Geneva talks despite the council's demand that it be invited¹⁹ and Manna's insistence that his group could not be ignored.²⁰

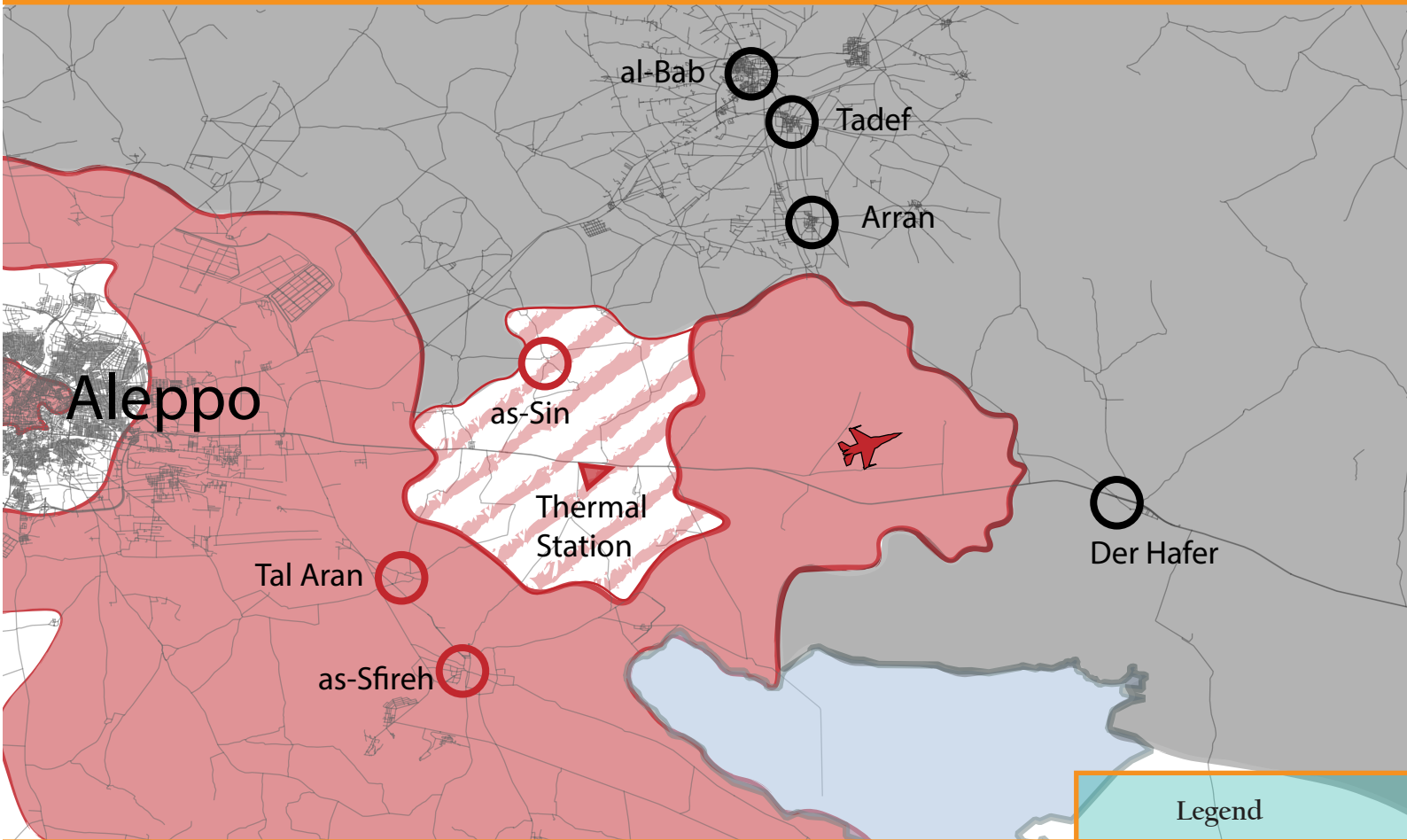
Kwaires Offensive

Government forces had intensified fighting on the Kwaires front aided by Russian air support and foreign militias in July 2015.²¹ First, the regime pushed north towards ISIS stronghold al-Bab. By the end of the month, it was within six km. With intensifying Russian strikes on ISIS-held positions, civilians tried to flee to safer areas, although many were prevented from leaving by ISIS.²²



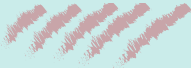



The government shifted its attack towards the west. ISIS slowed the regime advance with several suicide attacks and strong resistance.²³ By 20 February, the regime had taken 18 villages and the Aleppo Thermal Power Station from ISIS,²⁴ connecting the Kwaires Airport to regime-held areas of Aleppo. (See Map 34) This victory positioned the regime within 25 km of the Turkish border and close to ISIS strongholds. It also reestablished control over the first 25 km of the Aleppo-ar-Raqa highway.

Saving the Peace Process

The military escalation jeopardized the Geneva peace process. A U.S.-Russian agreement to implement a nationwide ceasefire per UNSC Resolution 2254 at the 12-14 February Munich Security Conference saved the situation.²⁵ On 27 February, the Russian Center for Reconciliation at the Bassel al-Assad (Hmaymim) Airport, in cooperation with the Amman-based U.S. Coordination Center, brokered a ceasefire between regime forces and most opposition groups. They intentionally excluded JN and ISIS. This ceasefire laid the groundwork for continuing the Geneva negotiation process.



Legend

	Area under government control (early January 2016)		Kwaieres Airport
	Territory gained by the government (26 January-21 February)		Key towns under ISIS control
	Area under ISIS control		Key towns under government control

Map 34: Government offensive near Kwaieres Airport (26 January-21 February 2016)

Source: LiveuaMaps

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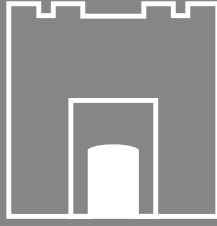
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