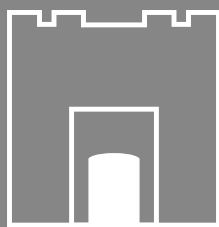


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

JUNE
2016

ALEPPO
CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

2016
JUNE

ALL AGAINST ISIS AMIDST DISAGREEMENTS IN THE HOUSE

In June, ISIS positions in the eastern Aleppo countryside were seriously weakened. On 30-31 May, with U.S.-led coalition air cover and the help of U.S., French and German special forces,¹ the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) marched westward towards Mnbej. Mnbej, along with al-Bab, are the two biggest cities in the *Wilayet Halab* (the Aleppo Province of ISIS caliphate). Before the Syrian conflict, about 120,000 people lived in the city. By the time ISIS had taken full control in early 2014,² there were 20,000 left.³ With the SDF's advance, even more left.

By 9 June, the SDF had imposed a siege on Mnbej. The siege cut off the main supply lines from Jarablus, al-Bab and most importantly ar-Raqqa. Without reinforcements, the city was doomed to fall. During the last week of June, the SDF entered the city from its southwestern and southern edges. By the end of June, it was slowly advancing in the city despite strong ISIS resistance.⁴ According to the Syrian Observatory, one month of fighting killed 98 SDF fighters, 508 ISIS fighters, and 118 civilians, including 50 who died in coalition airstrikes.⁵ ISIS claimed that from 25-26 June alone it killed 91 SDF fighters.⁶

The likely liberation of Mnbej by the predominantly Kurdish SDF will be less than ideal for its majority Sunni Arab inhabitants. The distrust between the two communities has grown during the conflict. Sunni Arabs are afraid that they will come under Kurdish hegemony and be suppressed. As there are no other forces fighting ISIS effectively, SDF remains the only option. The leaders of several Arab groups fighting under this umbrella have clearly indicated that the SDF is the only organized fighting force with the weapons, training and leadership to fight consistently and effectively against ISIS.⁷

The SDF advance put rebels operating near Azaz and Mare under heavy pressure. At the beginning of June, Mare was already cut off from Azaz. Besides air support, the U.S.-led coalition also dropped weapons and ammunition to the besieged rebels.⁸ After a week of resistance, the rebels launched a counteroffensive. ISIS did not put up much resistance as its territory was being attacked from many sides.⁹

The regime, for its part, tried to benefit from the escalation against ISIS by opening a new frontline along the al-Tabqa-Ithriya corridor. Although the regime had previously declared its intent to advance towards the ISIS stronghold of ar-Raqqa, it had not. When the SDF launched its offensive in late May, the regime used the opportunity to announce its new offensive towards al-Tabqa and its military airport which has been under ISIS-control since August 2014.

After initial gains in early and mid-June,¹⁰ government forces and allies withdrew after a fierce ISIS counteroffensive.¹¹ Despite these losses, it is important for the regime to be part of this large-scale escalation against ISIS. If ISIS crumbles, it can claim territory. Even if ISIS does not, the government can still be seen

as one of the main groups actively fighting ISIS.

Aleppo

Heavy bombing hit the northern and southern Aleppo countryside as well as the city. Since 22 April 2016, when the temporary ceasefire ended, extensive bombing has continued, killing 577 civilians in Aleppo city.¹² On 16 June, Russia announced a 48-hour ceasefire in Aleppo.¹³ The two days passed unnoticed as the agreement did not change the reality on the ground. Going in-and-out of the rebel held Aleppo via the Castello road remained a dangerous journey.

The government's main focus was in northern Aleppo countryside. Over the month of June, it tried to take control of al-Mallah Farms several times. In 28 June, it succeeded¹⁴ but the rebels successfully took some parts of it back after a few days.¹⁵ Nour ad-Din al-Zanki, al-Jabha al-Shamiyeh and JN halted the regime advance.

One of the major pro-government militias fighting in northern Aleppo is the Liwa al-Quds al-Filastini. With about 2,000 active fighters, this militia was founded in October 2013 by a Syrian-Palestinian. Most of its members have Palestinian roots. The group has developed strong ties to Iran from which it also receives weapons and funding.¹⁶

In the southern countryside, the Syrian army and particularly pro-government militias suffered a stinging defeat. After several attempts, Jaish al-Fatah took several villages and brought the fight near al-Hader, a regime stronghold. Between 15 and 18 June, the regime and its allies lost 86 fighters, including 25 from Hezbollah.¹⁷ Hezbollah leader Sayed Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged the losses in southern Aleppo but vowed to send more troops: “[w]e will increase our presence in Aleppo ... [r]etreat is not permissible.”¹⁸ IRGC Quds Force Commander Qasem Suleimani's visit to the area underlined that Iran considers this “Iranian territory.”¹⁹

Reshuffling the team

After the collapse of the latest Geneva talks, Moscow and Washington pressured the Syrian opposition to reshuffle its ranks. First, Jaish al-Islam representative and top negotiator Mohammed Alloush resigned. Then the head of the HNC, Asa'ad al-Zoubi, stepped aside. HNC denied it was under pressure and said it was, “putting its house in order.” But HNC's sudden willingness to include opposition groups close to Russia – such as the Cairo and Moscow groups – indicates that the HNC might have, at least partly, given in to Russian and U.S. pressure.²⁰

The situation on the ground is not promising. De Mistura's efforts to save the ceasefire have failed. In some areas, such as the northern and southern Aleppo countryside, fighting has escalated. De Mistura has called for talks to resume in July, but a date has not yet been set.²¹

Disagreements in the house

On 9 June, the Russian, Iranian and Syrian defense ministers met in Tehran to coordinate the details of upcoming military operations.²² Iran also wanted to ensure that the allies were on the same page and that their interests and objectives in Syria still had common grounds. The three vowed to “continue military operations until terrorism is rooted out.”²³ Despite this statement, the three do not agree how the conflict should play out in Syria. Each has a different objective. At the end of the day, Russia's interest in Syria is

not Assad, it is the United States. Assad and his entourage want to keep their power. Iran wants to keep Syria as its puppet state in the region.

These divergent interests became clear during June. Iran revealed its uneasy feelings with U.S.-Russian leadership of the Syrian dilemma. On 22 June, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said that the U.S.-Russian monopoly on the solution of the Syrian crisis was “not practical.”²⁴ Zarif went even further and bypassed Russia by offering a ceasefire in Syria in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.²⁵

This disagreement can be seen on the ground. The Syrian Observatory reported that the sky was free of Russian fighters when the regime suffered heavy losses in southern Aleppo countryside.²⁶ This could be seen as a sign of Russian disapproval of the fact that the southern front is under Iranian command.

There are similar ripples in the Russian-Syrian relationship. In his first speech to the newly elected parliament on 7 June, President Assad concluded that they had no choice but to liberate all Syria.²⁷ It is not clear, however, who is going to liberate the entire country.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, in a surprise visit to Damascus on 18 June, met the Syrian President in order to clarify Russian priorities. He also visited Russian soldiers. Shoigu urged the Hmaymim Airport-based reconciliation committee to speed up the process and “talks with heads of local administrations and commanders of armed groups in order to call on them to join the reconciliation process and the cessation of hostilities.”²⁸

These disagreements are not a surprise. The sides have had different interests since the early days of the Syrian conflict. Given that any solution to the conflict put forth by the United States and Russia will need the support of regional actors such as Iran to be implemented on the ground, these disagreements are not likely to develop into a major conflict. In this context, Russian-Turkish reconciliation also looks promising. After Turkish President Erdogan apologized for downing a Russian jet in Syria, their relationship has improved.²⁹ This rapprochement is crucial for resolving the Syrian conflict.

The divergent objectives of Russia and Syria are also clearly marked on the field. In the past two months, the Syrian Army has continuously attempted to siege Aleppo. Despite Syrian persistence and occasional Russian air cover, it seems that Russia is not keen on a major offensive on the city. Its ambassador in Damascus said, “I am not confident than an offensive on Aleppo will take place in the foreseeable future.”³⁰

Ramadan under fire

Once full of myriad vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, sweets and spices, Aleppian markets were empty of goods this Ramadan. Shopkeepers said that shortages meant prices were too high and there was no *har-ake* – literally movement, but in the Aleppian dialect it means that the market is empty and there are no customers.³¹ Many families have cut out meat and other expensive food items that once were at the center of Aleppian Ramadan tables.

Amidst these sad conditions, there are reports that the Russian Air Force has used unauthorized weapons in Aleppo. Even though there have not yet been any investigations, there is strong visual evidence that a Russian jet carried out a strike using incendiary cluster bombs in the northern Aleppo countryside.³²

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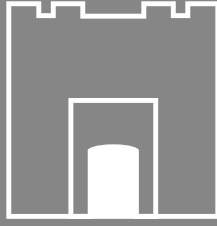
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