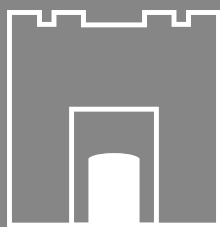


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

JULY
2016

ALEPPO
CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

2016
JULY

ALEPPO UNDER SIEGE

Besieging Aleppo

In July, the government put eastern Aleppo under siege. On 7 July, the second day of Eid al-Fitr celebrations, the Army and its allies took over a hilltop near al-Mallah Farms. This brought the Castello Road, the only route into rebel-held Aleppo, within range of artillery fire.¹ In practice, this besieged the city because any moving vehicle on the road became an easy target. On 16 July, the regime tightened the siege by cutting off the Castello Road completely.²

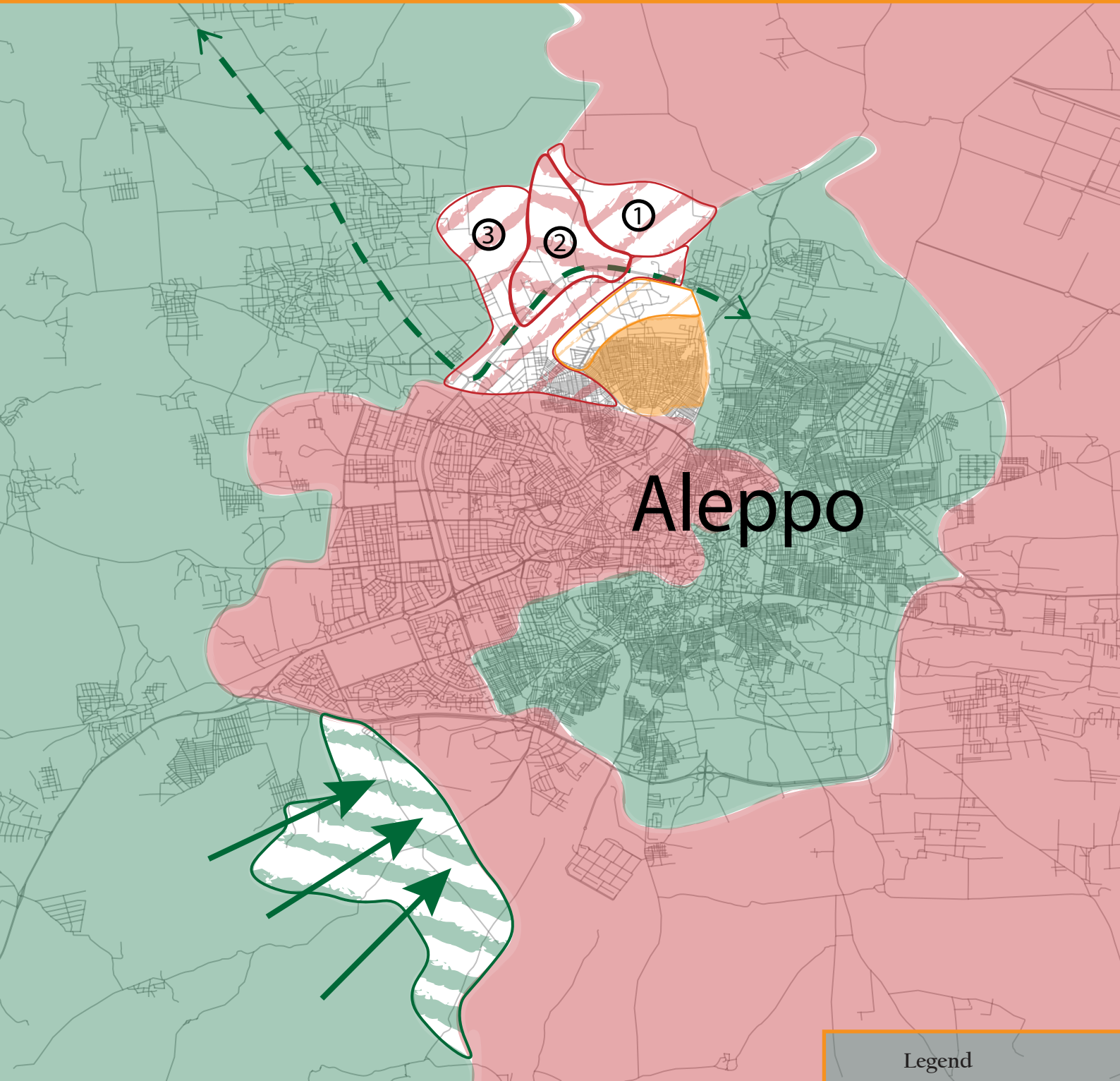
Finally, the regime moved in to take parts of al-Belleramoon industrial area and Bani Zeid district in northern Aleppo, placing the eastern side of the city under a total siege.³ (See Map 38). The Kurdish YPG/PYJ forces, stationed in ash-Sheikh Maqsoud, exploited the opportunity and enlarged their presence to as-Sakan ash-Shababi district. Media outlets close to the Syrian opposition accused the YPG/PYJ of joining the government in the siege.⁴ The YPG/PYJ's move exacerbated its already hostile relations with the opposition Fatah Halab operation room which regularly fires on ash-Sheikh Maqsoud.

Ahrar ash-Sham, one of the main fighting forces in Aleppo, halted its military activities. The group's spokesman for military affairs said that trying to break the siege in al-Mallah Farms would not be a heroic act but, "military suicide."⁵ Despite ash-Sham's withdrawal, other groups like Nour ad-Din al-Zanki and JN continued to attack regime forces but did not push them back.

Reciprocal bombardment of the western and eastern parts of Aleppo continued. As a response to the siege, Nour ad-Din al-Zanki targeted regime forces along the city's frontline. It also fired about 300 missiles into western districts.⁶ The group met with intense criticism after a Youtube video showed its fighters beheading a child they claimed was part of the government-allied Liwa al-Quds militia.⁷ The group stated that it was an individual act and the perpetrators would be tried and punished.⁸ But the incident had already caused much anger in Aleppo. It may also halt U.S. support to the group.

In the end of July, rebel groups in Aleppo and Idlib, including Ahrar ash-Sham, surprised regime forces by opening a new frontline in southwestern Aleppo.⁹ In the first few days, groups under Jaish al-Fatah and Fatah Halab, in particular Ahrar ash-Sham, JN and Failaq ash-Sham, came close to breaking the siege. But, within a day the regime had pushed them back.¹⁰ The declared military objective of the opposition campaign was to cut the regime supply line to the ar-Ramouseh Artillery Academy (southwest) and to the al-Mallah Farms and Handarat Camp regions (north).¹¹

As of July 2016, the opposition had not yet achieved its objective. There is immense pressure on opposition fighters in the region because the siege of Aleppo might determine the future of the rebellion. Losing Aleppo would mean losing the battle in the north. Once regime forces and their allies are entrenched,



Aleppo

Legend

- | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| | Area under government control | ① | First phase (7 July): government forces and allies occupied a hilltop near al-Mallah Farms |
| | New territory gained by government forces and allies | ② | Second phase (16 July): government forces and allies cut off the Castello Road |
| | Area under opposition control | ③ | Third phase (27 July): government forces and allies encircled Aleppo |
| | New territory gained by the armed opposition | | |
| | Area under YPG/YPJ control | | Castello Road |
| | New territory gained by YPG/YPJ | | Armed opposition offensive |

Map 38: Siege of Aleppo (July 2016)

breaking their defensive lines would become difficult, especially as they would have air cover. The battle has now shifted from preventing the siege of Aleppo to breaking it.

Aleppo under siege

The blockade puts 250,000 people in eastern Aleppo at the mercy of Russia and the regime. With the status quo, Aleppo could see a much larger version of the tragedy that has befallen Madaya or Daraya, two towns that have suffered intensely under regime sieges.

The UN and human rights and humanitarian organizations urged the government to let aid into Aleppo as the city does not have significant reserves of food or medicines.¹² The Russian and government response was to open three corridors for civilians and one for militants who wanted to surrender.¹³ On 28 July, President Assad issued an amnesty excluding armed opposition members from “full punishment if they handed themselves” over to the authorities.¹⁴ It was noteworthy that for the first time the decree did not exclude people “whose hands were soaked with blood.”¹⁵ This means theoretically that the amnesty would include a wider circle of rebels.

The pro-Assad media showed images of civilians using these passages to escape Aleppo.¹⁶ The reconciliation center in Hmeymim Airport announced that as of 30 July, 169 civilians and 69 militants had left Aleppo.¹⁷ SOHR confirmed that although the passages were open from the regime side and closed from the rebel’s side of the city, a few dozen residents left the besieged areas.¹⁸ The National Coalition and several rebel groups denied that there were any corridors on the ground underlining that they could not trust the Russians or the Syrian authorities. A Coalition member called these corridors “death passages.”¹⁹ The opposition demanded that international organizations monitor the passage in the presence of the International Committee of the Red Cross and independent media.²⁰

John Kerry’s position was more diplomatic. He said that if the Russian proposal was true and implemented on the ground, it would enhance the chances of military cooperation.²¹ UN Envoy Stefan De Mistura, who was not informed about the plan prior to its announcement, said the UN could organize the corridors, but questioned how people could leave safely while shelling continued. Russia responded by clarifying that they were ready to cooperate with the UN and all other aid agencies.²² As of the end of July, this cooperation had not occurred.

The bombardment of the city continued. On 24 July, four medical facilities were attacked by the government. Despite UNSC Resolution 2286, which calls for respect for hospitals, the Syrian Air Force targeted four medical facilities and a blood bank. Only one of these hospitals was hit directly, but all of them were temporarily rendered unusable. These incidents suggest a deliberate policy of targeting hospitals. The World Health Organization ranked Syria as the most dangerous place for health workers.²³

Daily life in Aleppo became increasingly difficult. Prices skyrocketed. Some reports spoke of a 300 per cent increase in prices for some products.²⁴ Gasoline, if it could be found, increased from 450 SYP to 1,500 SYP per liter and tomatoes from 150 to 600 SYP per kilo. Bread was still available but residents had to queue for hours to get a limited amount.²⁵ Shops and people still have some reserves, but once these run out there will be a humanitarian tragedy. An aid worker said that everything was ready, they just needed permission from the government to bring aid into the city.²⁶

Russian-U.S. military cooperation and JN's expected surprise

On 14 July, John Kerry carried a proposal to Moscow with the hope of resurrecting the Geneva process.²⁷ In the proposal, Kerry linked military cooperation against terrorism with a political transition and ceasefire in Syria. According to the draft seven-page agreement, the U.S. and Russian Air Forces would have a monopoly on targeting JN from the air. A joint committee would mark and target the territories solely or jointly controlled by JN. The Syrian Air Force would not be permitted to fly in these areas so it wouldn't be able to target armed groups using the presence of al-Nusra as a pretext. The agreement would also include cooperating in the fight against ISIS. Russia in turn would support a political transition in Syria.²⁸ But not everyone is enthusiastic in Washington. Both Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper expressed their distrust of Russia's plans.²⁹

De Mistura explicitly said that he was waiting the outcome of the Kerry-Lavrov negotiations before proceeding with the Geneva process. This agreement once again highlighted that any decisions will be made by Russia and the United States. Regional actors, although directly involved in the fight, play a secondary role. Syrian opinions are entirely neglected.

On 26 July, John Kerry reported progress in the negotiations and his hope for a clear outcome in early August.³⁰ These hopes, however, collapsed with JN's decision to leave the al-Qaeda network and become an independent armed group focusing only on issues related to Syria. The organization rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah ash-Sham (JFS) and vowed to fight against the regime, protect jihad in the Levant, and bring about more unity among rebel forces.³¹ The decision came after Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of the al-Qaeda network, released an audio message urging JN to "go ahead with what preserves the good of Islam and Muslims and protects the jihad of the Syrian people." In other words, let's break up.³²

Perhaps one of the important reasons for this decision was a possible U.S.-Russian agreement to target jointly JN. Such military cooperation would have put the organization under heavy pressure. In addition, JN's removal of the al-Qaeda veil and its complete adoption of the Syrian revolution could bring it to the negotiation table. At the end of the day, JN is one of the strongest organizations fighting in Syria.

The United States and Russia immediately announced that changing its name would not change anything and they would continue to target JSF.³³ This reaction was expected because although the loyalty of the organization might have changed, its ideology remained the same. Nevertheless, this tactical move by JN will influence Russian and U.S. decisions, especially because the development was welcomed by several important Syrian players.³⁴ Ahrar ash-Sham said that, "they had been waiting for this decision for a long time."³⁵ The Assembly of al-Sham Scholars,³⁶ an important community of religious scholars, also expressed its support for JN's decision.³⁷

Even HNC and the Muslim Brotherhood reacted positively. In a statement, the HNC welcomed JN's decision and underlined the necessity of following steps to "correct the previous mistakes and join the [Syrian] national project."³⁸ The Brotherhood stated that they welcomed JN's decision "to come back to the people and their will."³⁹

ISIS resistance in Mnbej

The SDF has been slowly tightening the siege of ISIS in Mnbej. While ISIS still controls the majority of the city and some parts of its countryside, they are not giving up. On 21 July, the SDF gave ISIS fighters 48 hours

to leave the city for other ISIS-controlled areas with their individual weapons.⁴⁰ After two days, ISIS refused the offer and clashes resumed. This offer came after civilian casualties rose considerably. Right before the ultimatum, a single U.S. airstrike killed at least 73 civilians as part of the Mnbej offensive.⁴¹ The United States promised to launch an investigation. Since the coalition's intervention in Syria, it has very conservatively counted civilian deaths. Washington officials claimed to have killed 55 civilians as of April 2016.⁴² Airwars, a group monitoring airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, put this number at least 10 times higher.⁴³ As of 23 July, the Syrian Observatory reported that the coalition had killed 594 civilians and 5,107 ISIS fighters.⁴⁴ It is worth noting that the coalition coordinates its airstrikes with the SDF which means the coalition might have been told to target the wrong location.⁴⁵

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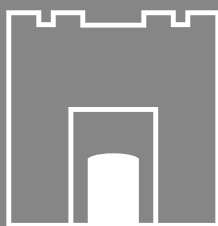
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