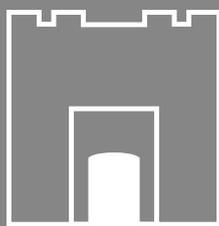


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

# SEPTEMBER 2016

# ALEPPO CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

# 2016

## SEPTEMBER

# THE RISE AND COLLAPSE OF THE KERRY-LAVROV AGREEMENT

### *Aleppo under siege again*

The Assad regime's policy towards Aleppo hardened again, this time, as HNC member Basma al-Kodhani said, "starve or surrender" became "surrender or we wipe you out."<sup>1</sup> With Russian backing, regime forces retook the al-Ramouseh military complex and adjacent areas by 6 September.<sup>2</sup> This enhanced their positions significantly as the eastern half of the city came under ever more intensive Russian bombing.

### *The rise and fall of Kerry-Lavrov agreement*

Russia's intransigence, the rigidity of US generals and the apparent naiveté of John Kerry led to the collapse of efforts to find a diplomat solution to the war raging in Aleppo. Early in September, Kerry, Lavrov, Obama, Putin and De Mistura all expressed optimism that it might be possible to reach an agreement to stanch the bloodshed. Two key issues delayed the agreement: Russia's inability to get government forces to stop attacking opposition areas and the inability of the US to stop the opposition cooperating with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly JN.

On 10 September, a deal was reached. Five documents with a detailed appendix were prepared by Russian and U.S. experts. The agreement, the text of which was not released, demanded that the government would not bomb opposition areas agreed by the US and Russia. The aim was to stop the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, particularly in eastern Aleppo.

A comprehensive seven-day ceasefire was to begin on 12 September, coinciding with the start of the Eid al-Adha holiday, to allow humanitarian access. If the first two aspects of the agreement were successful, Russia and the US would establish a joint operations centre to coordinate attacks on ISIS and Fatah ash-Sham. The ceasefire would then become permanent and talks would resume in Geneva.<sup>3</sup>

There were to be two humanitarian aid corridors, Castello Road and the ar-Ramouseh route to get aid to civilians in Aleppo. Detailed plans for the demilitarising of the Castello road were agreed to open it to humanitarian convoys..<sup>4</sup>

For the first time since the conflict began, there were no recorded deaths for 24 hours in the areas covered by the ceasefire agreement. De Mistura said there had been no airstrikes on the first day, only sporadic shooting.<sup>5</sup> The initial ceasefire was renewed on 14 September. Violence decreased significantly but the implementation of the ceasefire failed, mostly due to the failure to get humanitarian access along the Castello Road for the trucks that had been waiting since August.

On the second day of the ceasefire, Russia station armed monitors along the road where they were at-

tacked by an unknown opposition group. The attack was caught on camera and broadcast during a live broadcast by the Russian defence minister.<sup>6</sup> On 16 September, Russian military sources and the Syrian Observatory reported that government troops had withdrawn from the Castello Road. The Observatory said that as of that date, opposition troops were still in their positions and the violations continued from both sides.<sup>7</sup>

Humanitarian aid, which was in the buffer zone between Turkey and Syria, was still not allowed to enter the country. De Mistura said that according to the Russian-US agreement, the government was supposed to provide “facilitation letters” for the convoys to enter Syria but the UN never received the letters.<sup>8</sup> According to De Mistura, this failure was a “major disappointment,” even for Russia.<sup>9</sup>

After the two 48-hours ceasefires ended, the U.S.-Russian agreement started falling apart and fighting resumed.

On the first day of Eid, Assad reiterated that “we are determined to retake every inch of Syria from the terrorists.”<sup>10</sup> He was speaking from Daraya, a symbolic city for the opposition that has been under siege for four years and was recently evacuated. It signalled that there would be no let up in his insistence on a military solution.

Several key opposition groups also expressed discontent the agreement. A few days before the ceasefire, Ahrar ash-Sham’s spokesman said “we will not be abide by the ceasefire ... it is an U.S.-Russian agreement and we were not consulted about it.”<sup>11</sup> On the first day of the truce, 21 armed groups including Jaish al-Islam and Failaq ash-Sham, released a statement saying the agreement was against the basic values of the revolution, it would allow the government to consolidate its positions and it had excluded Fatah ash-Sham without even mentioning the pro-regime sectarian militias.<sup>12</sup>

The agreement raised a critical question: do the U.S. and Russia really have leverage over their partners in Syria? The conflict resolution model that these two countries chose excluded not just the Syrian sides but also key regional actors. They even did not want to share the text of the agreement with their allies.<sup>13</sup> The inability to press Assad to issue the “facilitation letter” on the Russian side and opposition’s rejection of the deal on the U.S. side are good indications of their weakness. If they cannot pass these “simple” orders how were they supposed to stop the regime from flying its airforce in its own country and separate Fatah ash-Sham from their allies?

The failure of this deal also exposed a major gap between the diplomats and the generals in the United States. Top officials from CIA and Pentagon publically defied Kerry and even Obama by refusing to share information with Russia.<sup>14</sup> In this way, they rejected one of the important pillars of the Kerry-Lavrov agreement. A similar pattern could be found in Moscow. From the very first day of the ceasefire, high ranking Russian officers such as the Defence Minister and the General Staff, blamed the US for not fulfilling its obligations.<sup>15</sup> They seemed eager to abandon the agreement, although many analysts took this as not so much the sign of a split in the Putin administration but that they had been leading the US along and had no intention of implementing the agreement.

As of 18 September, there were still hopes of reviving the ceasefire but two incidents blew up the entire effort.

On 17 September, coalition jets bombed Syrian army positions near the Der al-Zor airport killing at least 60 soldiers. Amidst Russian and Syrian accusations, officials from the Central Command said that the strikes were unintentional and were due to confusion over ISIS positions.<sup>16</sup> This is not very convincing because this was a fixed position which has always been under regime control (except January-March 2016).<sup>17</sup> Even though there is no solid evidence, the timing of this attack inflamed suspicions that it was a deliberate act.

The second blow came on 20 September, when a humanitarian convoy was targeted in eastern Aleppo countryside. The United States and the Syrian opposition groups immediately blamed Russia and Syrian regime for carrying an airstrike, something later borne out by a UN investigation.<sup>18</sup>

These two incidents turned the UNSC into a battlefield between Russian and U.S. Ambassadors Churkin and Power. The next day, on 22 September, Kerry and Lavrov assembled the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in Geneva to save the ceasefire but they could not reach an agreement. In this way, the second most serious attempt to reduce the level of violence in Syria collapsed only a few days after its implementation. Perhaps this was the last chance for Obama and Kerry to achieve a historic deal in Syria until a new administration is in place in Washington in January.

### *The aftermath*

The collapse of the agreement was marked by an unprecedented level of bombing and shelling of eastern Aleppo. An AFP journalist said: first fighter jets strike, then the helicopters drop barrel bombs and then the cannons start.<sup>19</sup> This shelling campaign was meant to pave the way for a rare ground offensive against eastern Aleppo. As of 30 September, government troops supported by foreign militias and air cover took control of Handarat Camp in the northern outskirts.<sup>20</sup> These forces also took the al-Farafira neighbourhood in the Old Town near the Aleppo Citadel.<sup>21</sup>

It is unlikely that the government will be able to take Aleppo by force of arms. The aim now is to starve it into submission, as it has done in other areas. The Local Aleppo Council and many armed groups are concerned that Aleppo is going to be a larger example of what happened in Daraya near Damascus and al-Waer in Homs. After many years of siege and devastation the residents and armed groups agreed to lay down their arms and leave in return for safe passage to opposition areas. There is a strong opinion that the government is trying to clear rebel presence around Damascus and Aleppo while leaving the northwest of the country to the rebels.<sup>22</sup> But this will not be an easy task because eastern Aleppo hosts about 250,000 residents and at this stage of the conflict it symbolizes the revolution. The rebels will not give up easily.

There are some signs that the collapse of the ceasefire might put an end to U.S.-Russian cooperation on Syria. There are some meetings in the corridors between U.S. and their allies suggesting that they are thinking about a “plan B” without Russia. This plan may include suspending the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) that is co-chaired by U.S. and Russia; more sanctions on Moscow and Damascus; more intelligence and military support to the opposition; and a no-fly zone.<sup>23</sup> Such “plan B-s” have been discussed many times but did not have a major impact on the ground.

Nour ad-Din al-Zanki, one of the most important groups in Aleppo supported by the U.S., joined the Jaish al-Fatah coalition on 24 September. According to their statement, this move was to enhance the unity of the rebels.<sup>24</sup> The timing, however, suggests that it was also due to the collapse of the ceasefire and once

more underlines the importance of this coalition in northern Syria. Especially, that before this announcement the speaker of Ahrar ash-Sham said that there will be unification within the ranks of Jaish al-Fatah. If this trend continues, this coalition where radical groups like Ahrar ash-Sham, Jaish al-Islam and Fatah ash-Sham dominate, may emerge as the main representative of those in the northwest of the country.

### *Opposition's vision of future Syria*

Riad Hijab, the HNC general coordinator, spoke of their vision of Syria's future at a conference organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. His vision did not differ much from what the resolution 2254 suggests. First, a comprehensive ceasefire, negotiations for six months and unhindered humanitarian aid. Second, an 18-month transitional period governed by a constitutional declaration. The noteworthy in this plan was that the opposition agreed to negotiate with Assad in the first six months but Hijab insisted that he will not have a place in the transitional period under any circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

### *Turkish terrorist-free zone in north Syria*

In the shadow of the developments in Aleppo, the Turkish Armed Forces helped their partners in the opposition to gain more territory from ISIS in northern Syria. Within a week the attacking forces cleared ISIS from the Turkish-Syrian border by creating a buffer zone ranging between two and twenty kilometres deep.<sup>26</sup> In this way ISIS lost an important gateway to the outside. It relied on the Turkish border to smuggle out oil and receive fighters. It also pushed back ISIS firing positions used to target Turkish cities. Ankara also announced that 50 U.S. soldiers arrived in Turkey to operate the newly-deployed High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS).<sup>27</sup> This will enhance the security of Turkish cities.

During September, Turkish and Syrian forces did not engage with Kurdish forces in the area. On 30 August, the spokesman of U.S. Central Command said that Turkish forces and YPG/YPJ agreed to focus their fire on ISIS rather than against each other.<sup>28</sup> Despite a Turkish denial of any ceasefire, there have not been any major battles. After this period of calm, YPG/PYJ began their withdrawal from Mnbej.<sup>29</sup>

Turkey is aiming to create a 5,000 km<sup>2</sup> "terrorist-free zone" (meaning ISIS and YPG/YPJ) including al-Bab, an ISIS stronghold. Erdogan expressed happiness that some Syrians had already returned to their country and hoped that many more would be able to do the same in the future.<sup>30</sup> According to another Turkish official, the free zone will be defended by about 3,000 Syrian rebel fighters with the help of the Turkish military.<sup>31</sup> This suggests a long term Turkish military presence in Syria because the opposition forces will not be able to hold out against ISIS alone.

### *Humanitarian situation*

In just six days between 19 and 24 September, Russian and Syrian forces killed 323 civilians in eastern Aleppo, according to the local civil defence.<sup>32</sup> In one night, airstrikes put two hospitals out of use. Now about 250,000 eastern Aleppo residents are left with only 6 hospitals.<sup>33</sup>

Some of the facilities of the White Helmets, or the Civil Defence Force, were destroyed. Three out of four of their centres were damaged by airstrikes. According to one of the rescuers, they could not respond to all requests for help because many vehicles were out of order. This unprecedented targeting of the White Helmets comes after a documentary film was released about their life-saving work in Aleppo. Damascus was also upset because the organization was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>34</sup>

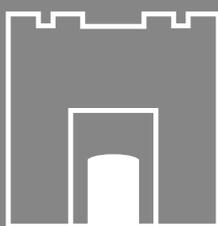
Aleppians have gotten used to having no water. After the bombing of eastern Aleppo the water pumping station in Bab an-Nayrab was damaged on 25 September. In retaliation, the opposition closed down the Suleiman Halabi station, depriving all of Aleppo from clean drinking water. UNICEF reported that people were forced to drink from contaminated wells.<sup>35</sup>

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