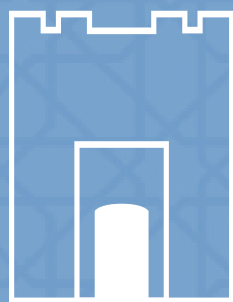


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

October - December

2016

ALEPPO

CONFLICT TIMELINE

Riham Wahba

# 2016

## October - December

### The Fall of Aleppo City\*

#### Dead End for Kerry-Lavrov Negotiations

The clouds of war started gathering after the fall of the Lavrov-Kerry agreement which aimed to cease hostilities in Aleppo. The fall of the ceasefire agreement was followed by intensified bombing on eastern Aleppo and periodic attacks towards western Aleppo. Blame exchanged between Russian and U.S. diplomats for breaking the agreement highlighted the fragmentation and fragility of the agreement and the lack of leverage over their allies on the ground. The resumption of violence caused mass scale damage and deterioration of living conditions in Aleppo, and gave space to armed opposition forces, especially Jabhat al-Nusra, to carry out further attacks.

Although rebel groups managed to break the siege in eastern Aleppo earlier in August 2016, which allowed food and ammunitions to enter the eastern part, the humanitarian situation deteriorated, and the level of deprivation inflicted upon inhabitants of eastern Aleppo increased until the fall of the city in December 2016. In continuation of the regime's strategy "Surrender or We Wipe You Out"<sup>1</sup>, bids for an urgent intervention to stop the annihilation of eastern Aleppo and its people went in vain.

### Failing International Efforts to Break the Siege

The heavy bombardment on eastern Aleppo pushed the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) to demand the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to enforce aerial bombardments pause on the city of Aleppo since it was killing hundreds of civilians.<sup>2</sup> In line with GCC calls, the UNSC rejected two resolution drafts, one submitted by France and Spain and the other submitted by the Russian Federation, to solve the situation in Aleppo leaving the issue unsolved.

Al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra was a key hindrance for any solution. Its presence served as a pretext for the regime to carpet bomb eastern Aleppo. In November, De Mistura addressed Jabhat al-Nusra fighters in eastern Aleppo offering them to leave the city under his protection. Russia responded accordingly by assuring the safety of thin corridors/checkpoints it had opened in four different districts around the city. But Jabhat al-Nusra refused to leave. Civilians also had little trust in the Russian-Syrian monitored corridor. Only a few took on the risk of getting shot when passing through. Alternatively, the UNSC came up with a different proposal to maintain the rebel-held areas of Aleppo under opposition control and rebel administration if al-Nusra fighters would leave the city.<sup>3</sup> This proposal got rejected by the Syrian government stating that such a move would violate its national sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

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\* This report benefitted from generous remarks by Armenak Tokmajyan and fellows of The Aleppo Project.

## CLOUDS OF WAR

On September 19, a UN aid convey near Aleppo was bombed.<sup>5</sup> The United States and Russia exchanged accusations for not facilitating aid delivery and breaking the ceasefire deal, although evidence provided by many sources highlighted that the bomb which targeted the convoy, OFAB 250-270, were usually used by the Syrian regime and the Russian Federation forces.<sup>6</sup> In a maneuvering tactic, the Russians accused Washington of failing to control the rebels, while Washington accused the Russians of having no leverage over the Syrian regime. As a result of these accusations and the growing discontent between Russia and the United States, on October 3, the U.S. suspended bilateral talks with Russia and accused it of failure in assuring the adherence of the regime to the agreement.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the U.S. froze the U.S.-Russian joint implementation center, which was meant to coordinate military operations from the air on Islamic State troops in Syria and intelligence information sharing. Shortly before this announcement, the Russian president announced the suspension of a plutonium clean up treaty between Moscow and Washington which was designed to ensure that both superpowers worked to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapon-grade plutonium and dispose of it safely.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this quarrel, talks between the U.S. and Russia were resumed on October 15, 2016<sup>9</sup> in the city of Lausanne. This reflected the lack of options DC had to alleviate the bombing on Aleppo. Although the two parties showed optimism, these talks did not yield a shared vision towards stopping the bombardment of the city of Aleppo, which was a deadlock for the Russian-American talks, and turned events into the direction of military action. Although Obama and Kerry were pushing for cooperation, officers in the intelligence refused to share information with Russia<sup>10</sup>, and the same took place in Moscow. Additionally, in its last days the Obama administration seemed to have little will to agree to a promise for which they were not certain of being able to fulfill.

## HOW DID ALEPPO FALL?

On October 21, Jabhat al-Nusra refused De Mistura's offer to evacuate the city. The Nour ad-Din al-Zanki group, in collaboration with the United Rebel Army, (founded in Aleppo in 2015 and included a large number of rebel organizations such as the Levant Front, Faylaq al-Sham [Sham Legion], and others but excluded Nusra fighters<sup>11</sup>), announced the beginning of a battle to liberate the whole city. The plan was to launch simultaneous offensives from inside the city, the eastern part, and outside in the countryside. Rebels based in the countryside, primarily Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest)<sup>12</sup> and Fatah Halab coalition (Aleppo Conquest), tried to break the siege by opening a long frontline along the south-western shores of the regime-held areas.

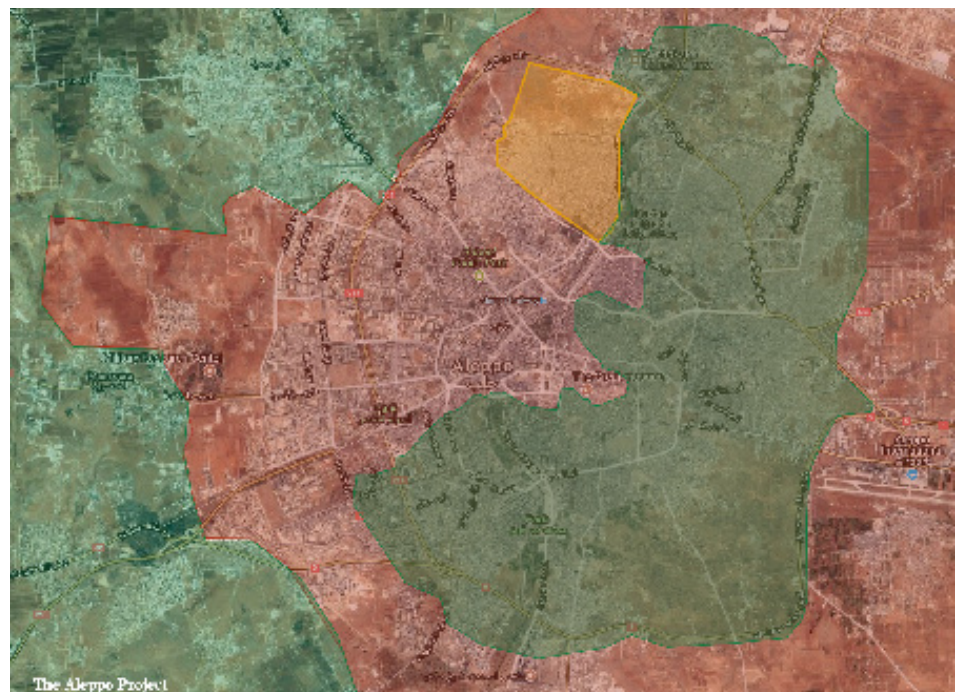
Areas of Control:  
October 1, 2016

■ Regime held areas

■ Rebel held areas

■ YPG held areas

Based on Sources:  
LiveUA Map, Google maps



On October 28, they briefly captured the Dahiet al-Assad district and the al-Assad artillery academy and started attacking adjacent areas of the 1070 and 3000 Housing Project districts.<sup>13</sup> This area was central to the regime due to its sensitive location between the major military bases of the Assad Academy and the al-Ramouseh Military Complex, as well as being located on the only road connecting Aleppo to the rest of regime-held Syria. Simultaneously, rebels opened another front from the countryside and fired more than 150 shells.<sup>14</sup> Rebels, trapped in the eastern part of the city made their bid to break the siege and help forces fighting outside the city by shelling parts in western Aleppo as a sort of distraction to the regime forces.

Despite the rebels' initial gains, the regime's intense bombardment and substantial help it received from Hezbollah fighters, prevented the rebels from advancing or holding their newly gained positions.<sup>15</sup> On November 3, the opposition made its last attempt to break the siege by relaunching an attack on the 3000 Housing Project district and the al-Assad Military Academy but their assault was repelled. Their failure made eastern Aleppo's fall inevitable.



By the end of November, the rebel forces lost control over the Hanano Housing district, which was a symbol for the Syrian revolution since it was the first district that came under revolutionary forces control in 2012.<sup>17</sup> The besieged rebels announced the formation of the Aleppo Army on December 1 to face the threat. This attempt was not just too late, it also was inefficient as the fragmentation remained under the title of the new coalition. More importantly, Turkey's "abandoning" of the rebels in eastern Aleppo, their counterparts', Aleppo Conquest coalition, withdrawal from Aleppo northwestern countryside, and Jabhat al-Nusra's intrepid and short-sighted decision to stay in the city left the future of Aleppo at the mercy of the regime and Russia.

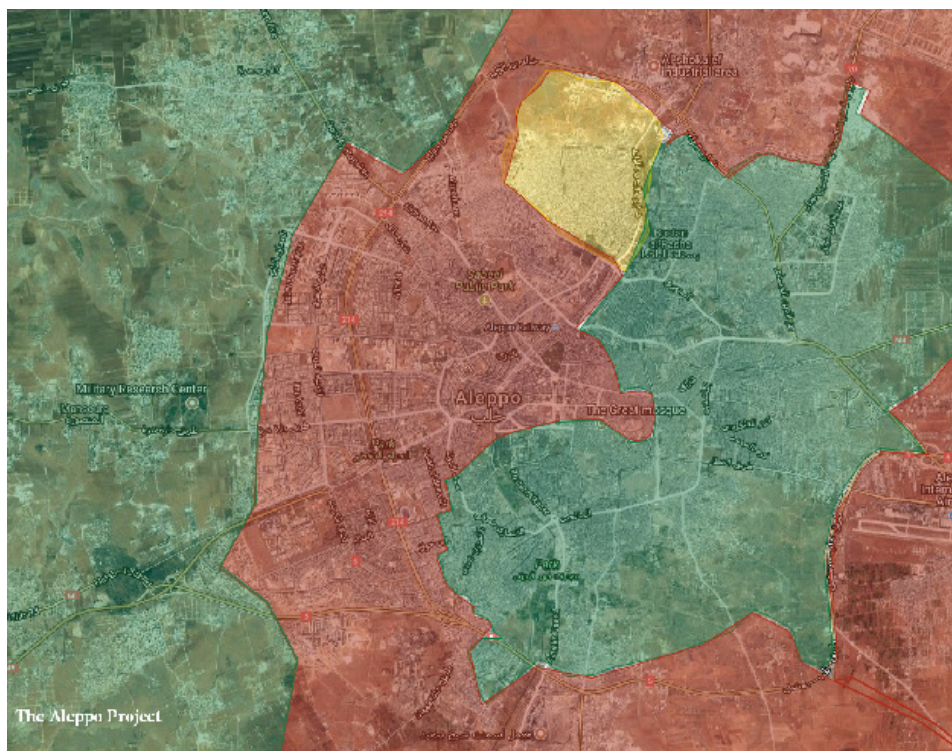
Areas of Control:  
November 15, 2016

■ Regime held areas

■ Rebel held areas

■ YPG held areas

Based on Sources:  
LiveUA Map, Google maps



The Assad forces kept gaining ground in Karm al-Qaterji, Karm al-Myassar, ash-Sha'ar, and the Old City districts. By the end of the siege, the districts of an-Nayrab, as-Salheen, as-Sakhour, and Sheikh Kheder fell. In December with the support of the YPG in ash-Sheikh Maqsood district, the Assad forces recaptured the whole north-eastern part of Aleppo. This part included the districts of al-Hellok, Bustan al-Basha, and Ayn at-Tal.<sup>18</sup>

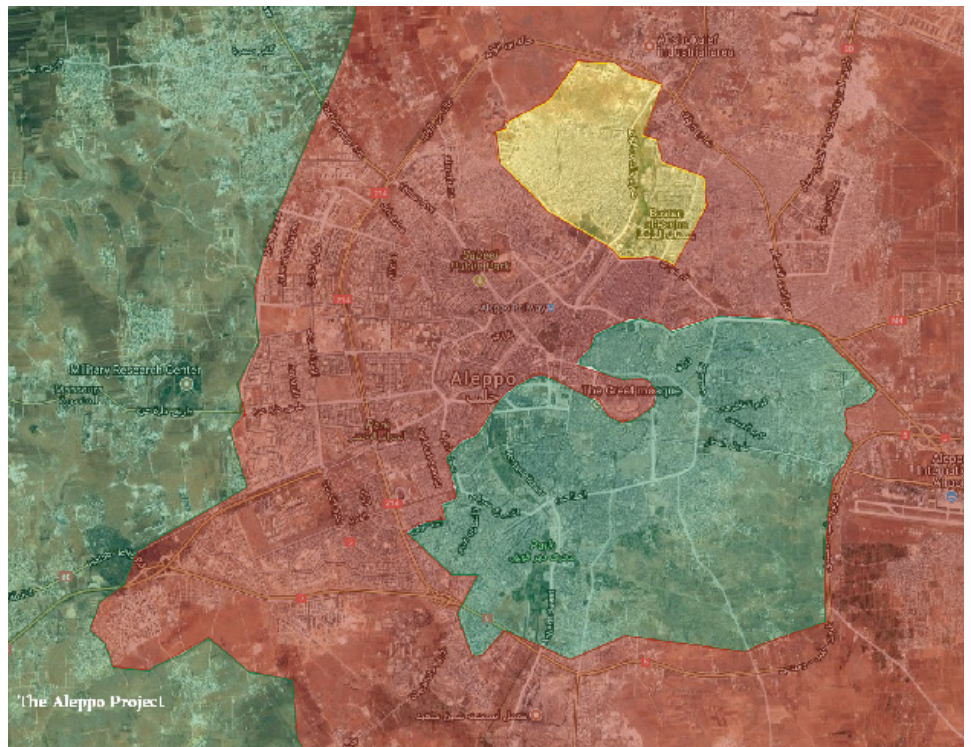
Left with no options, the rebel groups in eastern Aleppo started negotiations with Russia to save themselves and civilians since the regime's return seemed inevitable.



Areas of Control:  
December 1, 2016

- Regime held areas
- Rebel held areas
- YPG held areas

Based on Sources:  
LiveUA Map, Google maps

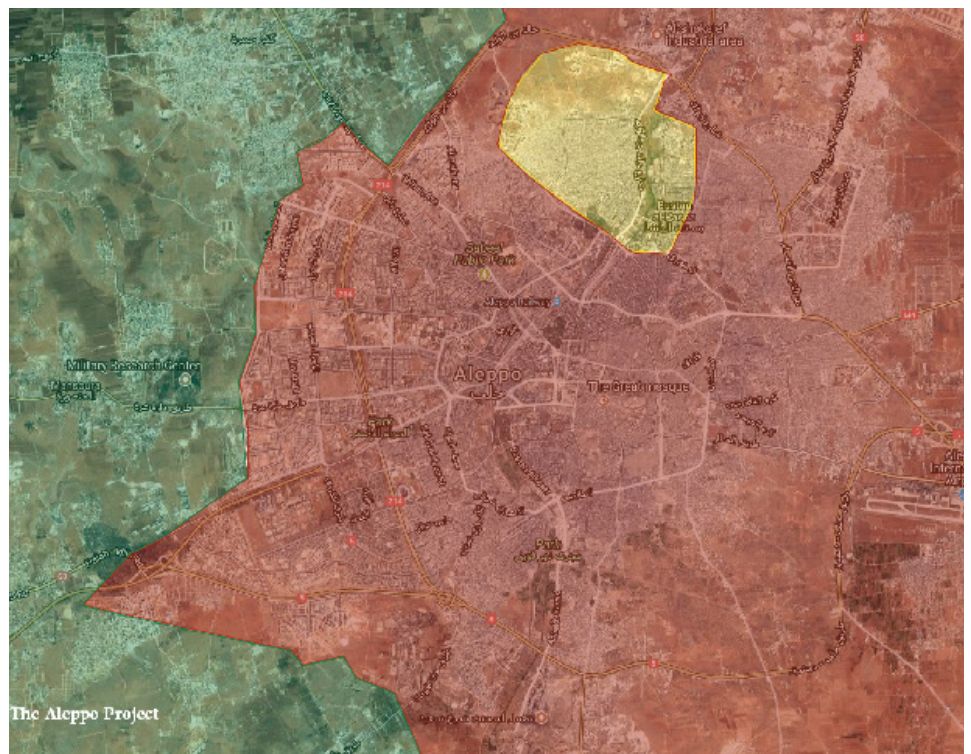


Turkey facilitated ceasefire talks between them. With the internal changes in the American administration, the United States stayed out of these talks. This made the opposition more lenient towards cooperating with Russia and Turkey who were in a more powerful position vis-à-vis the rebels. The following days in December showed some fluctuations in the deal due to the tensions that emerged between Turkey and Russia as a result of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's statements on overthrowing Assad.<sup>19</sup> After a few days, the two sides agreed on a ceasefire by December 13, 2016 which necessitated that Russia and regime forces were to stop bombardment in return for evacuation of rebels, as well as those civilians who feared persecution by the regime and had to leave to live under the regime, to Idlib.

Areas of Control:  
December 13, 2016

- Regime held areas
- Rebel held areas
- YPG held areas

Based on Sources:  
LiveUA Map, Google maps



The evacuation processes were interrupted because the agreement was broken after regime forces continued shelling eastern Aleppo. Thus, Russia and Turkey negotiated another ceasefire agreement which came into force on the night of December 14, and evacuation restarted on December 15. During the whole process of negotiation, Iran – whose militias had a strong presence around Aleppo – was largely left out. Therefore, as a show of its power and leverage on the ground, on December 14, it introduced new terms for letting the evacuation occur. It insisted on the evacuation of the wounded civilians from Foua and Kafraya – a besieged pro-government enclave in the rebel-held Idlib governorate with a majority of Shi'a Muslim population.<sup>20</sup> This play by Iran showed that despite Russia's dominance in the Syrian case on the international arena, on the ground, Iran played a major role through its militias.

## Evacuation

Under the Russian-Turkish sponsored agreement, 184 buses left eastern Aleppo carrying approximately 35,000 people who remained in the eastern part of Aleppo until the last days of the siege.<sup>21</sup> Reports, videos by activists on the ground from Aleppo, and news pieces reflected that some of the people on buses leaving eastern Aleppo left to regime-held areas. The majority of those who stayed on the buses were taken to the western countryside of Aleppo and Idlib province. The process was facilitated by the Committee of the Red Cross, and the UN humanitarian mission in Syria.<sup>22</sup> The first wave of evacuation was to the rebel-held territory to the west of Aleppo. The agreement also stated that fighters would be evicted from eastern Aleppo after the second or third convoy.

The evacuation was no smooth processes. It went on and off amidst accusations between the fighting sides for violating the ceasefire and hindering of the evacuation process. Hezbollah's and Iranian militias central role in monitoring the evacuation process slowed it down considerably. On the other side, one major incident took place on December 18, when rebels burned down buses that were going to evacuate the wounded from Foua and Kafraya to Aleppo.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, by December 22, officials announced the completion of the evacuation and rebel leaders announced that all rebels left eastern Aleppo.<sup>24</sup>

According to OCHA reports<sup>25</sup>, as of December 23, 2016, at least 53,773 residents have been displaced from eastern Aleppo to Government controlled areas and another 98 different locations as suggested by a UNHCR report.

# The Humanitarian Situation, from Terrible to Terrifying

Bombardments on eastern Aleppo tactically targeted infrastructure including power stations, bakeries, water pumping stations, hospitals and civil defense centers. By October 1, the Medecins Sans Frontieres-supported M2 and M10 hospitals, major medical facilities in eastern Aleppo, were attacked.<sup>26</sup> Besides the barrel and cluster bombs the Syrian army used, on October 1, the regime used phosphorous bombs<sup>27</sup> in eastern Aleppo which caused huge damage to targeted buildings and a state of horror and panic among civilians and civil defense volunteers in neighborhoods of ash-Sha'ar, al-Hellok, as-Sakhour, al-Haidariya, and Ba'aedeen who tried in vain to extinguish these fires.<sup>28</sup>

Since the beginning of November, there was a heavy unleashing of military aggression on the rebel-held parts of Aleppo and the surrounding rural areas. This led to a devastating humanitarian situation for civilians. Although the inhabitants of eastern Aleppo managed to get food and medical supplies in eastern Aleppo by the end of August, and during October through the brief break of the siege in the southwestern part of Aleppo, and again in November, food and medicines were also smuggled to eastern Aleppo from the YPG held Sheikh

Maqsoud.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of these attempts to relieve the deprivation inflicted upon inhabitants of eastern Aleppo, the lack of supply, accompanied with consistent if not increasing and inelastic levels of demand for nutrients and medications caused prices to soar. Due to the government's tight grip on the eastern part of Aleppo and the blockage of aid, the UN issued a bleak warning that the 250,000 citizens trapped in Aleppo besieged areas were at the risk of starvation.<sup>30</sup> In mid-November, Jan Egeland, the head of the UN-backed humanitarian task force for Syria announced that "the last remaining food rations were given out to rebel-held areas by the second week of November."<sup>31</sup> He further asserted that the food distribution could not be sustained since resupply was impossible. Alternatively, Syrian activists called for the use of parachutes to drop aid packages on besieged parts of Aleppo instead of the aid convoys that were usually not permitted by the government to enter eastern Aleppo, or bombarded at the corridors.<sup>32</sup> Beside food shortages, the city was suffering from shortages in gas and electricity, and water cuts.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, (SNHR), the Syrian regime, in 2016 alone, dropped 12,958-barrel bombs in Syria. Most of these barrel bombs were dropped in the Damascus Suburbs Governorate. Aleppo was the second most hit.<sup>33</sup> In November, the Assad regime used chlorine gas in Aleppo.<sup>34</sup> This represents a violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention which prohibits the use, production, transfer, stockpiling and retention of mass destruction weapons.<sup>35</sup>



The regime continuously carpet-bombed the rebel held areas of Aleppo using globally prohibited weapons.<sup>36</sup> During the period October 1 - December 22, 2016, The attacks by different groups on Aleppo province (which then included ISIS controlled areas in the eastern countryside), resulted in the murder of 460 people by government forces, 685 people by Russian Federation forces, 253 people by opposition factions, 58 people by international coalition forces, 13 people by the PYD, 7 by ISIS, and 50 others by unidentified groups.<sup>37</sup>

Western Aleppo also suffered from different offensives directed towards it, bearing in mind differences in scale, intensity and severity. On October 28, although rebel groups repeatedly criticized regime tactics in targeting civilian areas in eastern Aleppo, they launched indiscriminate mortar attacks towards western Aleppo. As a result of the attacks, 48 people, including 17 children, were killed.<sup>38</sup>

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