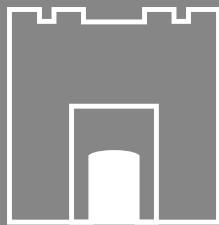
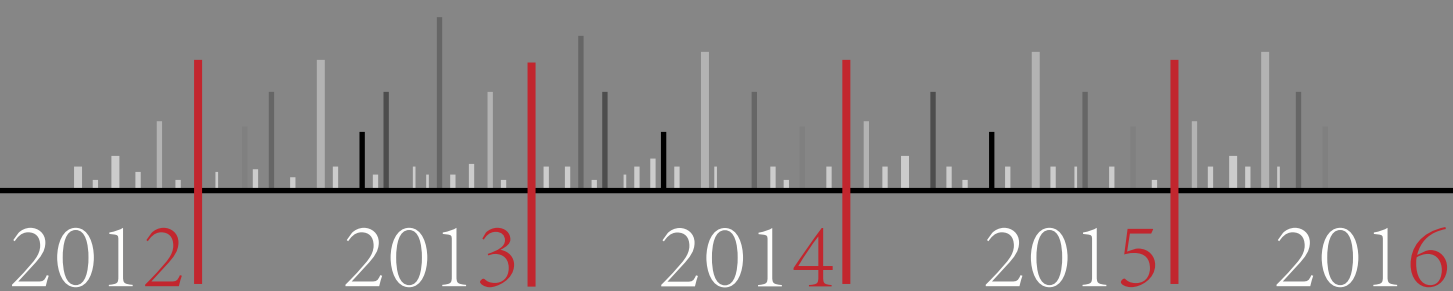


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب



ALEPPO

CONFLICT TIMELINE

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INTRODUCTION

Syria is suffering the brutal winter that followed the Arab Spring. This popular outpouring for social, economic and political change in the Middle East and North Africa started in Tunisia and has not ended yet despite the efforts of many governments to crush it. In Damascus in February 2011, protestors began to defy the heavy hand of the Assad family regime, which had been in power since 1970. The torture of several children by the security forces prompted more protests in Deraa in March. For the first six months, the protesters were largely non-violent but even peaceful protests met with intense brutality from the state. By September, armed rebel movements had emerged in response and Syria sank into what would become a catastrophic civil war.

Five years of the conflict have taken an astonishing toll. Somewhere between a quarter to nearly half a million people have been killed. Five million have become refugees and more than half the population of 25 million have fled their homes. Life expectancy has dropped by 15 years and the economy lies in ruins, with perhaps half the country's wealth gone. Priceless heritage has been lost. Syria has been set back decades and its social fabric has been rent apart.

The militarization of the revolution in late 2011 and early 2012 was a key turning point. Many factors contributed to the start of the civil war, particularly the government's violent response to demonstrations. Its crackdown created a sense among many in the opposition that only force would topple Bashar al-Assad. Regional actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, had long viewed the secular, nominally socialist Syrian government with distain and saw an opportunity to be rid of it. The West was paralyzed, fearful of interventions after the decade-long catastrophes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Russia and China, permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, were still seething over what they regarded as false promises over the NATO-led intervention in Libya.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ARMED OPPOSITION

The war was mostly driven by the violent, brittle and exclusionary nature of the Syrian regime, which allowed no room for even the discussion of a peaceful political transition. In summer 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), an umbrella organization formed mainly by military defectors and volunteers, made up the bulk of the opposition fighters. The head of the FSA, former Army colonel Riad al-As'ad, claimed to have around 15,000 combatants. Other sources estimate the number to be between 5,000 and 7,000 in early 2012.

In late 2011 and early 2012 there were several initiatives to unite the Syrian armed opposition. In November 2011, Riad al-As'ad announced the formation of the Temporary Military Council to manage armed operations in the country. In February 2012, another high-ranking military defector, Mustafa ash-Sheikh, announced the foundation of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army without any coordination with Riad al-As'ad. This led to a backlash between the two, each delegitimizing the other. The two reconciled in March 2012, and General ash-Sheikh took the leadership of the Council whereas Colonel al-As'ad lead the council's military operations. This initiative also collapsed mainly because the leadership, resident inside Syria, considered those outside the country as unrepresentative.

In September 2012 a new initiative was launched – The Joint Command for Revolution's Military Councils, which was led by five prominent brigadiers who had defected from the regime. This joint command was also short lived, in part due to the Qatari and Saudi rivalry and because it alienated religious groups.

Rebel commanders did learn a little from these early failures. In December 2012 the Supreme Military Council

(SMC) of the Free Syrian Army was formed. The new council was the largest so far and was established under the guardianship of the newly formed Syrian National Coalition – the largest opposition coalition outside Syria. Qatar and Saudi Arabia promised to channel funding together so as to maintain cohesion but they never lived up to this pledge. The council was briefly effective in 2013 but it slowly collapsed in 2014 due to internal rivalries, once again worsened by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The council was abolished in June 2015.

The two Gulf monarchies, engaged for years in their own rivalry for influence across the Arab world, have often supported opposing groups within the FSA commands and have by-passed senior leaders in favor of more compliant and ambitious junior figures. This has seriously weakened the coherence of the umbrella organization. Besides Saudi and Qatari government money, many rich individuals from the Gulf have supported their favored groups within or outside the FSA. In other words, some groups lived better off than others despite being associated with FSA. In addition, the international coalition under US leadership handpicked more moderate groups for support. This support is provided by Military Operations Command based in Turkey and Jordan since 2013. In short, the diverse sources of money has been a cause of division within the armed opposition. The groups affiliated with the SMC continued fighting either independently or joined new coalitions and alliances. The remains of the SMC were annihilated in the north-west where radicals dominate. In the east, they created new coalitions and received support from US to fight ISIS. The strongest representatives of the FSA remains the Southern Front. They have positioned themselves as moderates, winning significant support from the US.

Besides the FSA groups, there were many other coalitions and alliances. By late 2013 there were estimated to be as many as 1,000 separate armed groups with a total of 100,000 members. While it is impossible to track all of these, several trends in their development can be identified. The failure of FSA institutions to function effectively and overthrow the government led to the creation of other groups. The emergence of coalitions besides FSA as well as the rise of more radical groups was partly due to the failure of the FSA leadership to unite the rebels, distribute funding effectively and supply weapons. This encouraged rebel groups to search for alternative local or foreign sources of income. Many men joined the relatively rich jihadi groups like Jabhat an-Nusra (JN) and ISIS simply in order to earn a living.

None of these coalitions turned into a unified, coherent army with a clear command and control structure as most were unwilling to be subordinate to any higher body. In part this reflects the atomization of Syrian society under the Assad regime. Few institutions emerged that developed leaders or resilient structures. The various aims of outside supporters also promoted splits as did the machinations of the regime, which has covertly supported extremists in order to undermine a secular, nationalist opposition. As the conflict has gone on, many groups have turned into warlords rather than opponents of the regime and devote their energy to praying on the population rather than fighting the regime.

Some organizations stand out from the hundreds of opposition. JN is an ideological jihadist organization and the wing of al-Qaeda in Syria whose aim is to establish an Islamic State. ISIS is an agglomeration of foreign, Iraqi and Syrian fighters with an atavistic interpretation of Islam and an insistence that it has founded a new Caliphate. The most vivid difference between JN and ISIS was that the former has focused on toppling the regime whereas ISIS has pursued a more regional agenda without much interest in the Syrian revolution or Assad's faith. YPG is a Kurdish armed force that protects the interests of its ethnic group in the north with a pragmatic and ever shifting view of alliances and considerable military skill.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

To confront the armed opposition, the government deployed a mix of armed forces including some regular army units, intelligence units and paramilitary groups. The estimated number of troops in action from the army alone was between 65,000 and 75,000. But more than 60 per cent of active armed personnel are estimated to have remained in their barracks as the government could not count on their loyalty.

With the increasing number of rebels and foreign combatants in the opposition ranks, the government started training paramilitary groups and in early 2013 it upgraded different local defense committees to the Nation-

al Defense Forces (NDF), the biggest nationwide pro-regime paramilitary group with between 60,000 and 100,000 men. The NDF is trained by senior Hezbollah, Iranian and Syrian commanders.

Hezbollah officially entered the war on the side of the government after the Battle of al-Qusayr in summer 2013. According to French intelligence sources, the Lebanese militia had between 4,000 and 5,000 fighters in Syria in 2014. This is a major commitment from a group that only has around 5,000 active fighters and 15,000 reserves. Some recent sources put this number at up to 10,000 Hezbollah members.

Throughout the conflict, Assad and his inner circle have remained the key decision-makers although they have become heavily dependent on Iran and Russia for money, arms and diplomatic backing. The political opposition has failed to coalesce into a coherent group.

OPPOSITION POLITICS

The first coalition that represented the Syrian opposition globally and earned recognition and legitimacy was the Syrian National Council. Established in October 2011, mostly by exiled Syrian dissidents who wanted to lead the revolution. It did not have strong ties the ground and soon its internal divisions killed the project. In November 2012 and new coalition was born –The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. Formed in Doha, it encompassed many opposition groups including the Syrian National Council. Since then, it has been the main umbrella organization for the opposition internationally. Their internal problems have long been evident. For instance, the Syrian National Council, originally a founding member of the Coalition, withdrew when the Coalition decided to participate in talks in Geneva in January 2014.

Inside Syria, the main opposition body is the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. It was formed in June 2011 in Damascus. The Committee has similar goals as the Coalition but it wants to pursue it differently. It rejects intervention, sectarianism and militarization.

Explanations for the weakness of the political opposition mirror those for military weakness. Their dependence on manipulative foreign funders has undermined cohesion. The regime spent decades maintaining a death grip on political life, meaning that few opposition politicians are experienced. Most charismatic, capable leaders were broken in jail or exiled.

Meanwhile two UN and Arab League special envoys, Kofi Anan and Lakhdar Brahimi, resigned when they saw no way forward. The current envoy, the Italian-Swedish diplomat Stefan De Mistura, is still struggling to find any way forward. Since the Russian intervention in Syria in 30 September 2015, the role of De Mistura was marginalized even further. Now Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are the key actors.

THE TOLL OF CIVIL WAR

Assad's intransigence and the opposition's inability to overthrow the regime have led to a humanitarian tragedy. Between 18 March 2011 and 1 December 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented the death of around 300,000 people including 80,052 civilians, nearly a third of the total. In 2015 alone, the organization documented the deaths of 55,219, of which 20,977 or 38 per cent were civilian.

By the end of 2015, UNHCR registered about 4.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. In the summer of 2015, the number seeking asylum in Europe increased dramatically and had reached more than 813,000 by November 2015. According to UNHCR, there were around 6.5 million internally displaced within Syria. The UN organization was only able to provide assistance to 4 million.

More than 50 per cent of hospitals were badly damaged or destroyed; one-quarter of schools were out of service and the dropout rates exceeded 50 per cent. As of late 2015, 4 million children, inside and outside Syria, were out of school.

Aleppo is an important part of this story. Demonstrations started in the city in early 2012 but the civil war really began with a rebel attack in July that year. Syrian cities, Damascus and Aleppo in particular, had experienced a steady migration from rural areas for economic and environmental reasons. Many ended up living in vast informal settlements on the edges of cities. By the late 2000s, 27 per cent of the area under Damascus

City's jurisdiction consisted of informal communities. Half of all the homes in Aleppo were in similar areas. The fact that the rebels brought the revolution to the city and their control over the east of the city, the location of most of the informal settlements, indicates the deep division between town and country.

In 2012, a rebel leader from the Aleppo countryside said they had been obliged to "bring the revolution to [the city]." Divisions between Aleppo and its hinterland had only grown in the previous decade as the government steadily cut support for rural communities while encouraging an urban crony capitalism. Its failure to respond to the worst drought in at least a century heightened migration to the cities and deepened rural resentments.

This lack of concern for rural areas is reflected in the regime's strategy that has abandoned the countryside at first to the rebels and now to ISIS. Government forces have fought to keep open supply lines to Aleppo but otherwise have not devoted much effort to retaking the surrounding areas. Rebel forces have mostly responded to government moves and have tried to cut Aleppo off but have ended up being tied down fighting ISIS in areas outside the city.

This timeline tracks the armed conflict in Aleppo. It also includes information on the humanitarian situation and the damage caused to the city.