

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

INTRODUCTION

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 February 2011, Damascene protestors began to defy the heavy hand of the repressive state, which had been exercising 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 conflict have taken an astonishing toll on the Syrian people, economy, and society. Somewhere between a quarter to nearly half a million people have been killed. The United Nations put the figure at 400,000 in April 2016. Five million have become refugees and more than half the population of 23 million have fled their homes. Life expectancy has dropped by 20 years and the economy lies in ruins, with perhaps half the country's wealth gone. Priceless heritage has been lost. Four million children are out of school. 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 disdain and saw an opportunity to be rid of it. The West was paralyzed, fearful of intervention after the decade-long catastrophes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Russia and China, permanent members of the UN 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, brutal 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 opposition fighters. Although the head of the FSA, former Army Colonel Riad al-As'ad, claimed to have around 15,000 combatants,¹ others estimated the number to be between 5,000 and 7,000 in early 2012.²

In late 2011 and early 2012, there were several initiatives to unite the Syrian armed opposition. In November 2011, Riad al-As'ad formed the Temporary Military Council to manage armed operations in the country.³ In February 2012, another high-ranking military defector, Mustafa ash-Sheikh, founded the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army without any coordination with Riad al-As'ad. This led to a public quarrel

between the two, each delegitimizing the other. They reconciled in March 2012 and agreed that General ash-Sheikh would assume control of the Turkey-based Council, with Colonel al-As'ad leading the council's military operations.⁴ This initiative soon collapsed because the council's leadership, which was based in Syria, considered those outside the country as unrepresentative of the Syrian cause.

In September 2012, five prominent brigadier generals who had defected from the regime launched The Joint Command for Revolution's Military Councils. This joint command was also short-lived, in part due to the rivalry between the Gulf monarchies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. It also alienated some religious groups.⁵

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 coordinate funding, but never lived up to this pledge. Although briefly effective in 2013, it slowly collapsed in 2014 due to internal rivalries, once again worsened by Qatar and Saudi Arabia.⁶

The two Gulf monarchies, engaged for years in their own rivalry for influence across the Arab world, have often supported opposing groups within FSA commands and have by-passed senior leaders in favor of more compliant and ambitious junior figures. Besides Saudi and Qatari government money, many rich individuals from the Gulf have supported their favored groups within or outside the FSA. In addition, starting in 2013, the U.S.-led international coalition supported more moderate groups through Turkey and Jordan-based Military Operations Commands.⁷ This means that some groups within the FSA are significantly better equipped and funded than others. The diverse and divisive funding sources from actors with different interests seriously weaken the organization's coherence and cause rifts within the armed opposition.

Throughout 2014, groups affiliated with the FSA's Supreme Military Council continued fighting either independently or joined new coalitions and alliances. The remnants of the SMC were defeated in the northwest where radicals dominated. In the east, they created new coalitions and received support from the United States to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS). The Southern Front positioned itself as moderate, won significant support from the United States⁸ and remained the strongest representatives of the FSA.⁹

Besides the FSA groups, there were many other coalitions and alliances. By late 2013, there were as many as 1,000 separate armed groups with an estimated total of 100,000 members.¹⁰ 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 new groups. The failure of the FSA's leadership to unite the rebels, distribute funding effectively, and supply weapons contributed to the emergence of new coalitions and the rise of more radical groups. This encouraged rebel groups to search for alternative local or foreign sources of income. Many men joined the relatively rich jihadi groups like Jabhet an-Nusra (JN) and ISIS simply to earn a living.

These coalitions did not turn into a unified, coherent army with a clear command and control structure because most were unwilling to be subordinate to a higher body. In part, this reflected the atomization of Syrian society under the Assad regime. Few institutions emerged that developed leaders or resilient structures. Outside supporters also promoted splits as did the machinations of the regime, which covertly supported extremists in order to undermine what had started out as a secular, nationalist opposition. As the conflict has continued,

many groups have turned into local warlords rather than opponents of the regime. Many, though certainly not all, devote their energy to preying on the population rather than fighting the regime.

Some organizations stand out from the hundreds of opposition groups. JN is an ideological jihadist organization and the Syrian wing of al-Qaeda. Its 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 is 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 fate. YPG/YPJ (People's Protection Units/Women's Protection Unit) 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 and outside support.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

To confront the armed opposition, the government deployed a mix of armed forces including 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 remained in their barracks because the government could not count on their loyalty.¹¹

With the increasing number of rebels and foreign combatants in opposition ranks, the government started training paramilitary groups. In early 2013, it upgraded local defense committees to the National Defense Forces (NDF), the largest nationwide pro-regime paramilitary group with between 60,000 and 100,000 men.¹² The most notorious members of the NDF are the *Shabbiha*, mostly Alawite paramilitary gangs which helped the regime suppress the protests and then moved to fighting the opposition. The NDF is trained by senior Hezbollah, Iranian and Syrian commanders.¹³

Hezbollah officially entered the war on the side of the government after the Battle of al-Qusayr in summer 2013.¹⁴ The Lebanese militia had between 4,000 and 5,000 fighters in Syria in 2014.¹⁵ This is a major commitment from a group that only has around 5,000 active fighters and 15,000 reserves.¹⁶ In early 2016, there were thought to be up to 10,000 Hezbollah members in Syria.¹⁷

Throughout the conflict, although Assad and his inner circle have remained the key decision-makers, 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

In October 2011, exiled Syrian dissidents created the Syrian National Council, the first umbrella organization to earn recognition and legitimacy as the unified Syrian political opposition. The National Council maintained ties to some opposition groups in Syria such as Local Coordination Committees, which evolved from organizing demonstrations to acting as local opposition groups and governments. Its failure to build strong relationships with a wide range of opposition groups within Syria prevented the National Council from becoming truly representative.

As a result, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (National Coalition) was born in November 2012. 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.

In regime-controlled areas, the main opposition body is the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. It was formed in June 2011 in Damascus. The Coalition and Committee both claim to support regime change and reject sectarianism. The Damascus-based Committee, however, rejects foreign military intervention and militarization of the revolution.

The political opposition is weak for similar reasons as the opposition armed forces. Their dependence on manipulative foreign funders undermines cohesion and complicates coordination. The regime also 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 Annan between February and August 2012 and Lakhdar Brahimi between September 2012 and May 2014, resigned when they saw no way forward. The current envoy, Italian-Swedish diplomat Stefan De Mistura, has been struggling since July 2014 to find an end to the conflict. Since the Russian intervention on 30 September 2015, De Mistura's role has been marginalized even further. Now Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are the key mediators.

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 (Syrian Observatory) documented the death of about 300,000 people including 80,052 civilians, nearly a third of the total.¹⁸ In 2015 alone, the organization documented the death of 55,219, of which 20,977 or 38 per cent were civilian.¹⁹

By the end of 2015, UNHCR had registered about 4.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.²⁰ In the summer of 2015, the number seeking asylum in Europe increased dramatically and had reached more than 813,000 by November 2015.²¹ According to UNHCR, there were around 6.5 million internally displaced within Syria. The UN was only able to provide assistance to four million.²²

More than 50 per cent of hospitals are badly damaged or destroyed; one-quarter of schools are out of service and dropout rates exceed 50 per cent.²³ As of late 2015, four million children, inside and outside Syria, were out of school.²⁴

Aleppo is an important part of this story. Some 5.3 million people, almost a quarter of the Syrian population, lived in Aleppo province in 2008.²⁵ Two and a quarter million lived in the provincial capital in 2004. By 2011, this number had probably grown close to 3.1 million²⁶ if one includes areas on the city's outskirts and informal settlements that officially fell under Aleppo City's jurisdiction under the 2009 master plan. 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, have experienced a steady migration from rural areas for economic and environmental reasons.²⁷ Many rural migrants 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.²⁸ Half of all homes in Aleppo were in similar areas.²⁹

Divisions between Aleppo and its hinterland had only grown in the previous decade as the government steadily cut support for rural communities while encouraging 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.

In 2012, a rebel leader from the Aleppo countryside said they had been obliged to “bring the revolution to [the city].”³⁰ When they entered, rebels took over the eastern part of the city where most informal settlements are located. Many of the residents in these areas preserved their strong ties to rural Aleppo. This dynamic highlights the rural-urban as well as east-west division in Aleppo.

This lack of concern for rural areas is reflected in the regime's strategy that has mostly abandoned the countryside at first to the rebels and now to ISIS. Government forces have fought to keep open supply lines to the city 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 damage caused to the city.

ENDNOTES

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