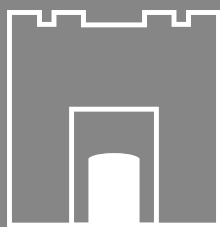


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

APRIL
2016

ALEPPO
CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

2016
APRIL

ALEPPO IS BURNING

The partial ceasefire led to some slight optimism that the negotiations in Geneva on 14 April might make some progress. A slight change in a government position enhanced this optimism. President Assad, in an interview on 1 April, said that “in principle” he agreed to the idea of presidential elections where all Syrians, inside and outside the country, would have the right to vote. He also took a more flexible stand than the armed opposition, saying that the government would consider any group to be part of the political process if it agreed to join the truce and “engage in dialogue” with the Syrian state.¹

But the sides remained far apart. Assad rejected the idea of a transitional government saying that the 2012 Syrian constitution did not allow it.² The regime’s formula was to create a new government that would include members from the regime and the opposition as well as independent politicians. Only after that would a new constitution be drafted. Depending on the new constitution, presidential elections might take place.³

The opposition insisted on forming a transitional government as described in UNSC Resolution 2254.⁴ The proposed government would have full executive powers and consist of members of the opposition (HNC) and technocrats from state institutions. Assad and others involved in the conflict would be excluded.⁵ The prominent Syrian lawyer Anwar al-Bunni suggested there should be an interim constitutional arrangement for two years, enabling the opposition to restore security, undo some laws passed by Assad during the conflict and end the immunity of state officials. Only after calm returned should the country draft a new constitution, he said.⁶

Regarding the army and security forces, the government rejected any restructuring of these two institutions and emphasized that the international community and opposition should support the “Syrian Arab Army” in its fight against terrorism. The opposition, however, insisted that these two institutions should be restructured by the National Security Council which would be created and supervised by the transitional government.⁷

To enhance the chance of success in Geneva, De Mistura tried to win support from key local and international actors. He met FM Lavrov in Moscow,⁸ FM Walid al-Muallem in Damascus⁹ and then flew to Tehran.¹⁰ Before the kick off, he also met with the HNC¹¹ and spoke with Secretary Kerry by phone.¹² De Mistura’s plan was to get all these actors on the same page before continuing the negotiations. Most importantly, he needed assurance from the United States and Russia that they were still committed to the process.

Talks Start

De Mistura opened this round of talks by expressing his disappointment regarding the slow progress on

humanitarian issues. In a press conference on 14 April, he said that members of the Humanitarian Task Force were “frustrated” by the lack of new convoys. Although some 5.8 million people in Syria had received aid, besieged areas remained a major problem and source of concern.¹³ He reemphasized that the plan was to have a transitional government within six months and presidential and legislative elections in 18 months; both timeframes started on 14 March 2016.¹⁴

The Syrian delegation arrived late due to parliamentary elections. Bashar al-Jaafari said they were still committed to “indirect Syrian-Syrian talks”¹⁵ despite the looming escalation on the ground.

At the start of the talks, the opposition leader As’ad al-Zubi complained that the regime’s escalation in Aleppo had forced 30,000 people to leave for the Turkish border.¹⁶ On 10 April, HNC member Bassma Kodmani said that “in the past 10 days we have seen a very serious deterioration and the ceasefire is about to collapse.”¹⁷ This coincided with the Syrian Prime Minister’s announcement that Syrian forces would “liberate Aleppo” and block supplies to groups that were not part of the ceasefire.¹⁸

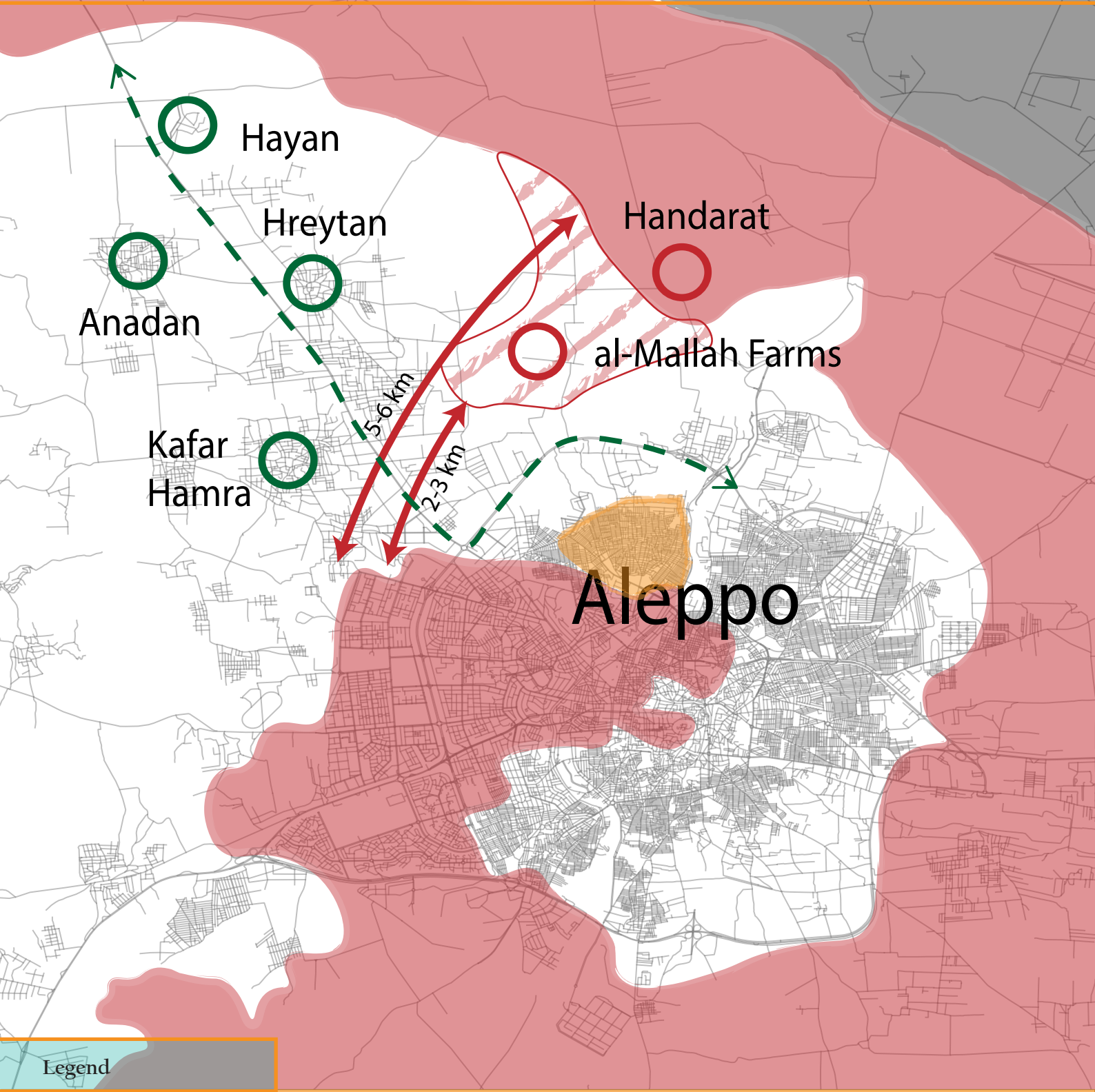
What did “liberating” mean in this case? Since the early days of the conflict in Aleppo, the regime had not been keen to take back eastern Aleppo because it would involve committing large numbers of fighters. So it meant besieging the city until it surrendered; a brutal tactic often used by the regime. Even though government forces now surrounded the city from three sides, it would be an arduous task to defeat well-fortified rebel groups, including JN, and lay siege to the city. But what the regime was after was political: it was flexing its muscles before the talks.

Bombing of the eastern side increased.¹⁹ But the heaviest clashes were in the Handarat and al-Mallah Farms area, north of the city. The escalation came on the first day of the talks in Geneva.²⁰ Civilians fearing a possible siege left Aleppo towards the Turkish border. Even though the city was not under siege, the only supply line – Castello Road – was under regime fire.



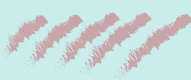




The government had often used cooperation between JN and other groups as a pretext for violating the ceasefire. Ahrar ash-Sham’s cooperation in particular was problematic because the group was officially part of the Geneva process and therefore a signatory of the ceasefire agreement. On 8 March, the government lost the town of al-Eis. Throughout April it unsuccessfully tried to take it back with the help of the Russian Air Force, the Iraqi Haraket an-Nujaba militia and other allied forces.²¹ Similar cooperation between terrorist-designated groups like JN and non-terrorist groups like Ahrar ash-Sham stopped the regime from advancing in the Handarat area, north of Aleppo.²²

Over this escalation in Syria, especially in Aleppo, the HNC froze its participation in the Geneva talks on 18 April. The general coordinator of the HNC, Riad Hijab, expressed his disappointment about the UN and major powers, especially the United States, by asking rhetorically: “how can those who are not even able to deliver milk to a besieged area in Syria bring about a political transition?”²³ He emphasized that the HNC would not compromise on its principles; the Syrian revolution or the rights of the Syrian people.²⁴ The chief negotiator, As’ad al-Zubi, confirmed that HNC had faced pressure before and during the Geneva talks to give up on some principles – i.e. Assad’s future – but it had refused.²⁵

The representative of Jaish al-Islam in the HNC, Mohammed Aloush, explained that the group had not withdrawn from the Geneva process but had frozen its participation to protest the regime’s escalation on the ground.²⁶ He also urged his comrades in Syria to prepare for war and respond to regime violations



Legend

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | Area under government control before offensive |  | Key towns under government control |
|  | Territory gained by government for one day (14 April) |  | Key towns under opposition control |
|  | Area under YPG/YPJ control |  | Castello supply line, rebel-held Aleppo |
|  | Area under ISIS control | | |

Map 35: Northern Aleppo countryside (mid-April 2016)

of the truce.²⁷ The opposition, including Ahrar ash-Sham, JN and Jaish al-Mujahedeen, escalated fighting on the ground.²⁸ At this point, the ceasefire was closer to collapse than at any time since it began on 27 February.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said that talks should continue in Geneva despite the HNC's withdrawal.²⁹ This was a chance for Russia to push forward other opposition groups in Geneva, something it had been trying to do since the creation of the HNC in Riyadh in December 2015. Moscow's two other preferred groups were the so-called Moscow-Cairo coalition and the Hmeymim group. The latter was a coalition of Damascus-based opposition groups, often accused of being close to the regime. In March 2016, Russia created this group, which was later invited to Geneva to take parts in the indirect talks.

Despite Russian efforts, these two groups have had very limited political leverage on the ground and no military influence. In comparison, the HNC, which has a wider political network inside Syria, has international support and represents several important armed groups such as Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaish al-Islam. The withdrawal of the HNC left the talks meaningless despite the fact that officially they continued until 27 April.

On 26 April, the Russian Ambassador to the UN submitted a proposal to the UNSC's Counter Terrorism Committee to list Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaish al-Islam on the international terrorist list.³⁰ In fact, Ahrar ash-Sham did have close connections to al-Qaida. In early 2014, one of its top commanders, Abu Khaled al-Suri, was assassinated. Al-Suri was an Aleppian veteran jihadist who escaped Syria in the 1980s and fought in Afghanistan. The U.S. Department of the Treasury referred to him as al-Qaida's "representative in Syria."³¹ The Russian plan, however, was problematic because the overwhelming majority of Ahrar ash-Sham's fighters were Syrian and had no global jihadist program. More importantly, Ahrar ash-Sham was the largest Syrian group. If left out of any negotiations or agreements, Ahrar ash-Sham could become a strong spoiler.

Aleppo is Burning

The last week of April will be remembered as one of the darkest in the city's history. According to the White Helmets, between 22 and 30 April, the regime launched more than 260 airstrikes, 110 artillery strikes, 18 missiles and dropped 68 barrel bombs.³² The most shocking attack was carried out on the al-Quds hospital in as-Sukkari. The direct hit killed the last pediatrician working in eastern Aleppo.³³ The armed opposition responded by shelling western Aleppo with civilians being the main victims. According to the Syrian Observatory, during these nine days, 140 people were killed in eastern Aleppo and 96 in the western half of the city.³⁴

Aleppo was left to its fate because there was an obvious Russian-U.S. agreement to abstain from doing anything about it. This left the city at the mercy of the regime's indiscriminate bombardment and opposition's random shelling. "Burning" Aleppo was a tactic to force the HNC to bend in the negotiations, particularly on Assad's future.³⁵ This tactic was agreed to by Russia and the United States.³⁶

Despite the alarming situation in Syria and the lack of progress in Geneva, De Mistura called for an International Syria Support Group (ISSG) meeting before 14 May, the scheduled date of the next phase of the Geneva talks.³⁷ Renewed Russian-U.S. agreement was fundamental to the success of any negotiations.

Humanitarian Crisis near the Turkish border

In early April, the Syrian armed opposition captured several villages near the Turkish border from ISIS, including the important al-Rai border town.³⁸ This was crucial to enhance the position of the HNC before starting the Geneva talks. The opposition, however, could not hold all the captured territory. In mid-April, ISIS took back al-Rai and the other towns.³⁹ It forced 60,000 IDPs who lived in camps located on the Syrian side

of the border to flee towards Azaz.⁴⁰

In April, ISIS intensified its rocket attacks against the Turkish city of Kilis in response to Turkish participation in a recent offensive by the Syrian armed opposition. Since January 2016, the city has been hit by 41 rockets, which killed 18 people.⁴¹ In response, Turkey, with the help of the United States, will deploy a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) to neutralize ISIS rockets. The system is expected to be deployed in May.⁴²

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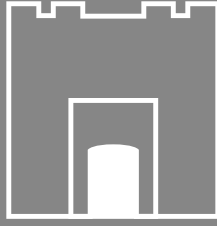
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