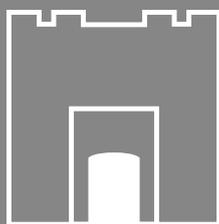


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

MARCH

2016

ALEPPO
CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

2016 MARCH

SOME SIGNS OF NORMAL LIFE UNDER THE CEASEFIRE

Despite some violations, the ceasefire not only reduced the level of violence, it also gave new life to the Geneva negotiation process. De Mistura said he was optimistic and knew that all ceasefires would have some violations.¹ On March 14, negotiations resumed. De Mistura insisted that forming a transitional government would be the central issue.

On 13 March, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem said that no one, including De Mistura, had the right to discuss the fate of Assad. He said that this issue was a “red line” for Damascus and would not be discussed in Geneva.² He went on to explain that a “political transition” for Damascus meant “moving from the old constitution to a new one; from the old government to a new one with the participation of all side [including the opposition].”³ Assad made a similar remark, saying that a political transition meant a new constitution to determine Syria’s political system.⁴ The HNC said that although it would come to Geneva without preconditions, the negotiations should lead to a transitional period without Assad.⁵

This round of negotiations also highlighted Moscow and Damascus’ diverging opinions of the concept of a transitional government. While Russia stuck to Resolution 2254 dictating the creation of a new government to lead the transitional period, Damascus insisted that this body should be a “unity government” that included some members of the opposition.⁶ Russia’s surprise partial withdrawal from Syria at the start of the negotiations seemed to affirm Russian intentions to push Assad to soften his position.⁷ Despite Putin and Assad’s denials that this move was to pressure Assad, it was a clear sign from Moscow that its support had limits.

Problems

Who would represent the Syrian people on the opposition side remained an unresolved question. The HNC remained the main player and rejected the participation of any “third side” in negotiations. One of these “other” sides was the Moscow-Cairo group which included Qadri Jamil, an opposition group close to the regime as well as independent opponents like Jihad al-Maqdisi.⁸ Russia, the main backer of this group, urged the international community to officially include it in Geneva III. The HNC rejected this idea.

It was difficult to assess which opposition groups were officially part of the negotiations. The negotiations were indirect, De Mistura met with many different parties, and there was no list of official participants. On 16 March, De Mistura officially met with the Moscow-Cairo group to hear its vision for Syria’s future.⁹ Separately, Jihad al-Maqdisi announced it would participate in the Geneva process as a third party and not as part of the HNC.¹⁰ Nevertheless, judging outcomes from the 14-24 March Geneva meetings, the HNC played the central role.

Another important and excluded “third side” was the Kurdish PYD under the larger umbrella of the SDF. Its continued exclusion from the Geneva negotiations led it to announce its federalist vision for Syria. The SDF organized a two-day conference with 200 representatives from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. On 18 March, the participants announced their support for Rojava, Afrin, Kobani and al-Jazeera cantons to become part of a federal Syria.

From a legal perspective, this announcement was not valid. Whether or not Syria would have a central or federal system would clearly need to be decided by the constitution of a central government. Turkey, Iran, the Syrian authorities and the HNC said the decision was illegitimate. Even allies of the SDF such as the Damascus-based National Coordination Committee and Syrian Democratic Council (NCC) Co-Chair Haytam Manna rejected this unilateral step.¹¹ The United States, which relied on Kurdish forces to confront ISIS in north Syria, also rejected this decision.¹² Russia, on the contrary, was supportive, though the Deputy Foreign Minister said that Syrians would decide what suited them best.¹³

BOX 13: Geneva III. First phase outcomes. 14-24 March

De Mistura released 12 “guiding principles” agreed to by both sides.¹⁴ The next phase of the negotiations would focus on specifics of the transitional process.

Besides broadly used terms such as fighting corruption, respecting human rights, no discrimination, no foreign intervention, the rule of law, gender equality and building democratic institutions, De Mistura managed to bring the sides to a common ground on a number of issues.

The first point referred to *territorial integrity*. Both sides wanted to see a unified and centralized Syria and strongly rejected any plans to divide it. They agreed that refugees should participate in the political process and be able to return to their country. The sixth point, which focused on the *political transition* per UNSCR 2254, clearly stated there should be elections administrated by the UN with the participation of all Syrians inside and outside the country once a new constitution was in place. The eleventh point specifically referred to a refugee’s *right of return*.

The eighth point suggested that both sides had agreed to keep *state institutions*, but introduce serious reforms. The fate of the security forces, which the regime wanted to keep and the opposition wanted to dismantle, was not specifically mentioned. The tenth point spoke about a *new national army* with a monopoly on weapons, the inclusion of armed groups that supported the Geneva process and the exclusion of foreign fighters. It did not mention the fate of the current Syrian Army which has become decentralized and weak.

They agreed to fight all forms of *terrorism* and cut financing, sheltering, arming and training terrorists. They did not agree on the definition of terrorism or terrorist groups.

The final point concerns the state’s responsibility to *compensate* people affected by the war, return their properties and raise money for reconstruction.

De Mistura asserted that the parties would receive significant support from the international community to follow this political process to resolve the conflict.

Ceasefire

Under the Russian-U.S. brokered ceasefire, some signs of normal life reappeared in Aleppo. Most importantly, the constant bombardment of eastern Aleppo stopped. Rebel fighters exploited this relative calm to drink tea with friends, play football and PlayStation, or spend time with their families.¹⁵ The absence of barrel bombs and airstrikes cut the Civil Defense's work by 80 per cent. Before the ceasefire, each center received about 50 requests for assistance per day. After the ceasefire, it dropped to 10 per day. Instead, the rescuers played football and took days off.¹⁶

The ceasefire revived Aleppo's once vibrant streets. Children played in the streets. Markets became more crowded and business got better.¹⁷ Less than two weeks into the ceasefire, at least 100 protests had taken place across the country.¹⁸ Most were nonviolent. Protestors, who did not fear regime helicopters or soldiers, called for freedom and the downfall of the regime with the same slogans that shook many Syrian cities in 2011.¹⁹ Soldiers did not hide their happiness that the truce was holding. Most agreed that even a few minutes without gun-shots was a relief.²⁰

Civilian casualties plummeted. Between 27 February and 27 March, the Syrian Observatory documented 363 conflict-related civilian deaths, the fewest over a thirty-day period since November 2011. The month before, about 1,100 civilians were killed.²¹

The ceasefire, however, did not cover all areas in Aleppo. Fighting continued in ash-Sheikh Maqsoud and some parts of al-Ahsrafiyeh between YPG/YPJ and several armed groups, notably JN.

It was unclear why they were fighting. One possible explanation was that the YPG/YPJ, as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, had cooperated with the Syrian regime in its campaign against the armed opposition north of Aleppo during February 2016. In response, the armed opposition in the city attacked Kurdish areas. In early March, Kurdish forces fired on Castello Road, the only supply route into or out of the city.²² Even though the opposition eventually took full control of the road, fighting continued.

Kurdish forces accused several opposition groups of starting this fight. The main actor appeared to be JN in cooperation with other groups within the Fatah Halab operation room, including Ahrar ash-Sham. While JN was not part of the ceasefire, Ahrar ash-Sham was. The violence in ash-Sheikh Maqsoud partly reflected JN's tactic of dragging other groups into violating ceasefires.

JN was fighting a similar war on at least two fronts in southern Aleppo countryside. Alongside Ahrar ash-Sham, JN tried to advance against government forces in the Khan Touman area without success. On 8 March, they took over al-Eis, the strategic highland in the western countryside captured by the regime in December 2015.²³

On 5 March, ISIS again disrupted the regime's only supply line connecting Aleppo to Hama, Homs and Damascus in the eastern Aleppo countryside.²⁴ This time, the regime responded by retaking the route and continuing its offensive further east.²⁵ By mid-March, government forces had pushed about 14-16 km away from Khanasser.²⁶

Near the Turkish border, ISIS faced the armed opposition. Under the cover of coalition airplanes and Turkish cannons, the opposition captured several villages near the Turkish-Syrian border.²⁷ As of March 2016, ISIS still controlled approx. 60 km of the Syrian-Turkish border from Jarablus to ar-Rai and Hawar

Kilis.

Humanitarian Issues

The ceasefire certainly improved the humanitarian situation in Aleppo. At least one crucial issue remained unresolved: water. In early March, city residents complained they had everything except water. For three months, Aleppo was without clean municipal drinkable water, the longest water shortage since the beginning of the conflict. The price of bottled water imported from Turkey doubled from 450 SP (two dollars) to 900 SP per 12 bottles.²⁸ The shortage was caused by a November 2015 Russian airstrike that targeted the water treatment plant under ISIS control and fuel shortages at the an-Nayrab and Suleyman al-Halabi pump stations in Aleppo city.²⁹

On 4 March, water returned to the city from al-Khafsa, a town near the Euphrates River, and the pump stations received operating fuel. After 80 days without, the municipal water supply resumed in many areas on both sides of the city.³⁰ The water problem, however, was not solved completely. Some neighborhoods, including al-Midan/Bustan al-Basha, did not receive water.³¹

Electrical infrastructure was divided between the regime and the opposition. Aleppo's electricity was generated in regime-controlled Mahardeh, Hama. The transmission cables passed through areas under JN control. In mid-March, JN and the government agreed to resume electricity after a four month outage.³² Aleppo, however, no longer relied on government-generated electricity because many people on both sides of the city bought their electricity from privately owned large generators. The price for one ampere ranged between 500 to 1,000 SYP per week. To provide power to a refrigerator, TV and one or two lamps, a household needed three amperes per week.³³

From 30 September 2015 until 2 March, Russian airstrikes killed 4,408 people according to the Syrian Observatory. This included 1,733 civilians (39.3 per cent), 1,183 ISIS fighters (26.8 per cent) and 1,492 from opposition groups including JN (33.8 per cent).³⁴ Between the Russian intervention on 30 September 2015 and their partial withdrawal on 15 March 2016, the Russian Defense Ministry said it had conducted 9,000 sorties and destroyed 209 oil production facilities and 3,000 oil delivery vehicles. It also said it had killed about 2,000 fighters from the Russian Federation fighting in Syria. The Russian Air Force helped Syrian forces reclaim 10,000 km².³⁵ President Putin revealed that Russian military activities had cost 33 billion Rubles (464 USD million).³⁶

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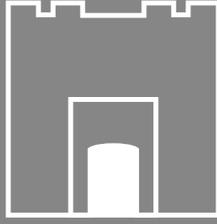
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