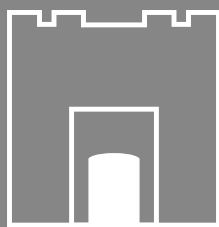


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

AUGUST  
2016

ALEPPO  
CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

2016  
AUGUST

## REBELS Break THE SIEGE

### *Breaking the siege*

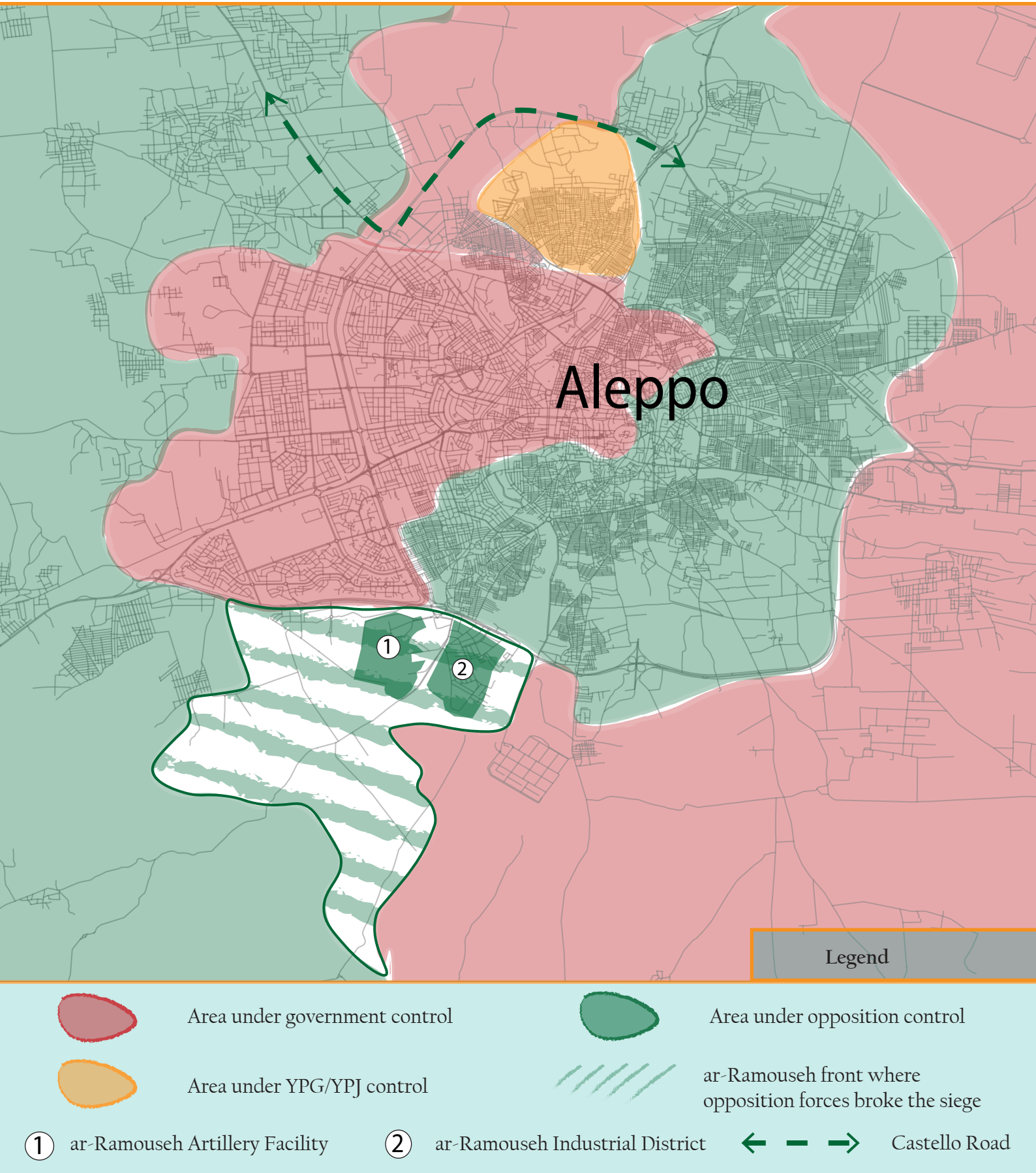
The regime's siege of Aleppo proved to be short-lived. On 6 August, the opposition, under the leadership of Ahrar ash-Sham and Jabhet Fatah ash-Sham (formerly JN) broke through government positions in the southwest of the city.<sup>1</sup> (See Map 39). According to the spokesman of Ahrar ash-Sham, this took place in three phases, starting on 1 August and ending when opposition forces occupied the ar-Ramouseh Artillery complex and industrial district. In this way, the rebels successfully cut the east-west axis, the main supply line to western Aleppo. The attackers announced that the ultimate aim of the offensive was to liberate Aleppo from the regime, although since breaking the siege they have focused on keeping their gains against fierce government and loyalist attacks backed by Russian air support.<sup>2</sup>

Islam Aloush, the spokesman of Jaish al-Islam, which is part of the Jaish al-Fatah coalition, explained the main reason for their success was that many groups from Hama, Idlib and Aleppo came to fight this battle. These groups also dedicated dozens of military vehicles and soldiers, and acted as one group.<sup>3</sup> Al-Hayat estimated that the opposition mobilized about 10,000 fighters against 5,000 from the regime and its allies.<sup>4</sup> During the six-day rebel offensive, 65 civilians in western Aleppo and 42 in the eastern part of the city lost their lives.<sup>5</sup> Since then, neither opposition nor the regime have managed to shift control in southern Aleppo.

Despite breaking the siege, there was no safe way in or out of eastern Aleppo. The passage that the opposition created into the city remains a war zone and is too dangerous for civilian use. Since 11 August, Russia and regime forces implemented three-hour ceasefires between 10:00-13:00 local time and claimed to deliver necessary aid to both rebel and regime-held parts of Aleppo through Castello Road. UN humanitarian officials said that three hours was not enough and 48 hours would be needed to complete the relief operation.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of August, a weekly 48-hour ceasefire was under discussion. Convoys would enter Aleppo from government-held Castello Road. Aid would be distributed simultaneously to both sides of the city and during the ceasefire the generator that supplies electricity to the city's water pumping station would be repaired.<sup>7</sup> Russia agreed to the plan. The opposition did not reject the deal, but insisted that the humanitarian convoys should enter Aleppo from ar-Ramouseh, the area where they broke the siege. They said that using the government-controlled Castello Road would give the government legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> The UN, on the contrary, insisted that it chose Castello for logistical reasons. In reality UN did not want to use the rebel route because of Russian pressure and since Jabhet Fatah ash-Sham, formerly JN, was one of the leading factions controlling the area.<sup>9</sup>

Another reason was because Russia insisted on leaving ar-Ramouseh out of the ceasefire zone. This meant that even during the weekly 48-hours ceasefire, Russian and regime jets could strike rebels located in the south of the city.



Rebels Break the Siege (as of 31 August 2016)

Source: based on [LiveuaMaps](https://liveuamaps.com)

## *Diplomacy*

According to the roadmap designed by FMs Lavrov and Kerry at the Geneva III talks, the transitional period in Syria should have started in August 2016. Since April 2016, when the ceasefire agreement and Geneva talks crumbled, diplomacy has been pushed to the background. In July, Kerry revived hopes by carrying a comprehensive plan on Syria to Moscow. Since then, the two diplomats have had several meetings, the latest of which was on 26 August.

They want to reestablish the ceasefire, improve the humanitarian situation and bring the sides back to the negotiating table.<sup>10</sup> In other words, rebuild the old negotiation framework. They kept the details of the agreement secret for the moment but emphasized that there was some progress. Judging from their remarks, there are two key issues. First is how to separate Jabhet Fatah ash-Sham, formerly JN, from other opposition groups. Second, Assad's future.<sup>11</sup> As long as there is not a solid agreement between the two powers on these issues, serious negotiations will not resume.

The recent Russian-Turkish rapprochement left its mark on the Syrian conflict. On 9 August, the leaders of both countries met in St. Petersburg to take an important step towards reconciliation after relations cooled when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter near the Syrian border in November 2015. The meeting came after the failed coup d'état in Turkey which Putin had immediately condemned, opening up the possibility of a rapprochement. Unlike western countries, he also disregarded the human rights violations and the arrest of thousands of people by Turkish authorities in the aftermath of the incident.

The repercussions on the Syrian war were clear. On 12 August, Turkish Foreign Minister Chavushoglu said that Ankara would cooperate with Russia against terrorism in Syria.<sup>12</sup> This meant that NATO's main power in the middle east would cooperate with Russia separately. Erdogan also called Putin to explain the Turkish intervention in Syria,<sup>13</sup> something that Moscow did not oppose.

In August, Ankara-Damascus relations saw some activity. In mid-August, pro-government National Defence Forces and the Kurdish Asayesh forces clashed in al-Hassakeh, a city mostly under Kurdish control in the far east of Syria. The fighting escalated despite several Russian mediation efforts. Damascus carried out airstrikes against Kurdish positions in the city and labelled them as the Syrian wing of the PKK, which pleased the Turks.<sup>14</sup> "It is clear that the [Syrian] regime has understood that the structure Kurds are trying to form in the north [of Syria] has started to become a threat for Syria too," said Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim.<sup>15</sup> Further, some reports suggested Assad's government would send a delegation of security personnel to Turkey to revive the 1998 agreement to jointly fight the PKK.<sup>16</sup>

If agreement can be reached between Washington and Moscow, a new peace process might start with more active Turkish involvement. The Kurdish issue and the fight against ISIS could unite Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey and Damascus.

## *Mnbej Liberated, Kurds trapped*

After fewer than three months of operations, the SDF liberated Mnbej from ISIS. According to the Syrian Observatory, 1,019 ISIS and 299 SDF fighters died as well as 437 civilians, 203 of them due to coalition strikes.<sup>17</sup> During the final assault, SDF opened a passage for ISIS fighters to leave the city towards Jarab-lus. ISIS left the city with sympathizers and abducted civilians who were forced to accompany them to

deter coalition airstrikes.<sup>18</sup>

Since early 2014, Mnbej has been an important part of the Caliphate project. ISIS has proven its ability to provide basic services such as water, electricity and bread. In return, however, it imposed harsh social rules and suppressed any form of disobedience.<sup>19</sup> The relief of the remaining population was clear. Right after liberation, some women burned the burqas they were forced to wear and men trimmed beards they were forced to cherish.<sup>20</sup> With thousands of people heading back home, a new era was about to start. With ISIS gone, a crucial question is on the table: who will rule Mnbej and the adjacent areas?

Saleh Muslim, head of the Kurdish PYD, said in an interview that they “don’t care about [Turkish] red lines” and SDF’s next destination is Afrin and not ar-Raqa<sup>21</sup> If the SDF, a predominantly Kurdish force, makes it to Afrin, almost the entire Turkish-Syrian border would be under their control.

Muslim’s vision was incompatible with the U.S.-Turkish understanding. Before the Mnbej offensive, the United States assured Turkey that once the operation ended, the SDF would return to the east of the Euphrates. The Kurdish leader believed the SDF would not be forced to retreat east of the river because the YPG/YPJ (the main component of the SDF) has been the most effective force against ISIS. The United States, however, appeared willing to keep its promise to Turkey. In a press conference in Ankara, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden announced that if the SDF did not withdraw it “cannot, will not, and under no circumstances will get American support.”<sup>22</sup> The YPG/YPJ released a statement attesting its withdrawal from Mnbej,<sup>23</sup> but in reality it still holds tight to its positions on the ground.

Turkey was not satisfied with these measures. On 24 August, Turkish tanks crossed the Syrian border alongside Syrian rebels.<sup>24</sup> In one day they expelled ISIS from Jarablus. About 1,200 Syrian rebels from Liwa Sultan Murad, Failaq ash-Sham, Ahrar ash-Sham, Haraket Nour ad-Din al-Zanki and al-Jabha al-Shamiyeh participated in the operation that was named “Euphrates Shield.” The Turkish presence gradually increased to about 50 tanks and 380 soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

On the day of invasion, Erdogan said “this morning our army started an operation against terrorist organizations like ISIS and PYD [political wing of YPG/YPJ] in northern Syria, who have been threatening our country and security forces.”<sup>26</sup> In the longer run, this operation aims to “cleanse the border of the Islamic State and other militants”<sup>27</sup> and perhaps establish a de facto safe zone in north Aleppo countryside.<sup>28</sup> As the head of the Liwa Sultan Murad rebel group explained, the rebels wanted to head west towards rebel-held areas of Mnbej, al-Rai and Mare.<sup>29</sup> The Turkish incursion is increasingly focused against the Kurds rather than ISIS. Moscow and Washington are concerned that Turkey will be preoccupied with fighting the Kurds, an important force against ISIS.

Kurds are paying a high price. Turkey and the rebels are advancing rapidly against YPG/YPJ positions. A Syrian rebel commander said that they are fighting the Kurdish forces because they refused to retreat east of the Euphrates.<sup>30</sup> The Kurds’ former international backers, including the United States, left them to the mercy of the Turkish forces. Just a few days before the Turkish intervention, U.S. airplanes were providing air cover for SDF operations. After the intervention, they were nowhere to be seen. Russia at first was “worried”<sup>31</sup> about the escalation, but tacitly approved the intervention after a telephone call between Presidents Erdogan and Putin.<sup>32</sup> The Syrian regime has also given a tacit green light for this operation amidst some signs of Turkish-Assad rapprochement over the issues in al-Hassakeh.

Kurds may say they have “no friends but the mountains” but they certainly bit off more than they could chew. Taking over Mnbej, advancing towards Afrin and thereby controlling almost the entire Syrian-Turkish border was not realistic. The Turkish intervention halted this plan. It may also prove that there are reliable alternative forces in the Syrian armed opposition who can stand up to ISIS. But how long can Turkish tanks stay in Syria? Turkish PM, Binali Yildirim, said they would stay as long as needed.<sup>33</sup> This may be Turkey’s first step into the Syrian quagmire. Now Turkey is involved in two wars of attrition – against the PKK in eastern Turkey and against the YPG/YPJ in northern Syria.

### *Russia and foreign bases*

On 16 August, Russia carried out air strikes using the Iranian base in Hamadan. The Aleppo countryside was one of its targets.<sup>34</sup> The United States doubted the legitimacy of these operations and the State Department said it might be a violation of UNSCR 2231 which restricts Iran’s military links with other countries.<sup>35</sup> FM Sergey Lavrov responded by saying “There has been no supply, sale or transfer of combat jets to Iran.”<sup>36</sup> This event triggered a debate in Iran. An Iranian MP criticized<sup>37</sup> the government for violating Article 146 of the Iranian constitution that forbids “[t]he establishment of any kind of foreign military base in Iran, even for peaceful purposes ...”<sup>38</sup>

In fact, this whole Russian show was not supposed to be publicized. Iranian Defense Minister Brig. Gen. Dehghan called the Kremlin’s behavior a “betrayal of trust” and “ungentlemanly.” This was a sign of poor coordination and a lack of Russian consideration of Iranian sensitivities.<sup>39</sup> The Iranian foreign ministry intervened to save the situation and said the Russian presence was “temporary, based on a Russian request ... It is finished, for now.”<sup>40</sup> Soon after this, Russia withdrew its fighters saying that “they completed their operations.”<sup>41</sup>

A Russian official said at the beginning of August that Russia is looking at the legal conditions to make its Hmaimim airbase in Syria permanent.<sup>42</sup> If this were to happen, it would be contrary to what Russian officials said at the beginning of the intervention in September 2015.

### *Humanitarian Situation in Aleppo*

As a result of intense clashes in southern Aleppo, an electricity supply station located near ar-Ramouseh was damaged. With no power, the water pumping stations stopped working. On 9 August, UNICEF described the situation as alarming because the entire city was without clean water.<sup>43</sup> The authorities provided an alternative supply to some districts.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the opposition Aleppian Assembly mediated between the opposition and the government to keep a power line from Hama functional in order to supply both sides of the city with a few hours of electricity per day.<sup>45</sup>

Breaking the siege did not bring prices back to normal because eastern Aleppo was still under de facto siege. “Some eggs, tomatoes and [cooking] materials like flour and sugar came in, but prices are high, unlike before the siege.”<sup>46</sup> The prices are also high in the western part partly because people are stockpiling food for fear that the situation will become worse and partly because the regime supply route is now longer.<sup>47</sup> It runs through the Sheikh Najjar industrial zone, Handarat and only then to the city through the Castello Road.

Will there be a legal inquiry regarding the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government and ISIS? This question was discussed behind closed doors on 30 August by UN Security Council members in a meeting to discuss a confidential report issued by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

The report looked into nine cases of confirmed usage of chemical weapons. It was noteworthy that the report pointed the finger at the government for carrying out two of the attacks, ISIS for one and could not find sufficient evidence to determine the actors behind the others.

France, the UK and the US immediately called for sanctions against Damascus. The French Ambassador called for “a quick and strong Security Council response” against the perpetrators.<sup>48</sup> Such action, however, is not very likely. The Russian Ambassador to the UN said “there are a number of questions which have to be clarified before we accept all the findings of the report” after the closed meeting.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile the Syrian counterpart refused the conclusions of the report saying it did not provide enough evidence.<sup>50</sup>

### *17,723 died in regime prisons*

According to a study released by Amnesty International, at least 17,723 people died in detention in Syria between 2011 and 2015.<sup>51</sup> The rights group came up with this number by employing a statistical tool called Multiple System Estimation using four different sources. The figure is much lower than the estimated 60,000 the Syrian Observatory said had died in government prisons based on regime insider sources.<sup>52</sup> The true number remains unknown due to the extreme secrecy of the regime security apparatuses. Amnesty International also released a 3D projection of Syria’s most notorious prison Sednaya.<sup>53</sup>

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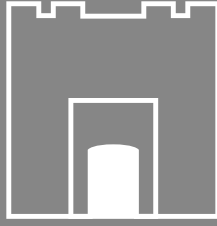
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