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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

The Siege of Eastern Ghouta: Russia and the Syrian Regime Face Tough Resistance

Policy Analysis Unit | March 2018

Russia and the Syrian Regime Face Tough Resistance in Eastern Ghouta

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Introduction

Since February, 2018, the Syrian town of Eastern Ghouta has been under heavy shelling by the regime and its allies in an apparent bid to quash the large popular support base for the opposition in the town. The ultimate aim is to push out the armed opposition groups besieged there. To date, hundreds of civilian lives, mostly non-combatants, have been claimed by aerial bombardment and shelling by the Syrian regime. For the regime's part, UN envoy Bashar Al Jaafari has declared the Assad regime's intention of repeating the course of action adopted in the East Aleppo siege (which ended with a rout of the opposition on the eve of 2017). This paper shall attempt to understand what makes Eastern Ghouta different, and specifically if the region can hold out longer against the regime.

The Siege of Ghouta

"Ghouta" applies to a former green belt region, rich in fruit orchards and reliant on a series of tributaries of the Barada River which runs through Damascus itself. The three areas named Ghouta surround the Syrian capital from the south, east and west. They form a part of the "Rif Dimashq" governorate (lit. "the Damascus Countryside") which encircles the Syrian capital. Combined, the three areas of Ghouta have a surface area of 370 km². Today, the formerly agricultural region has been subject to urban sprawl from nearby Damascus and has received thousands of Syrians displaced from their former agricultural settlements. Today, it is itself the site of numerous towns and urban centers, including Douma (the administrative center of Ghouta) and Harasta. Prior to the revolution, the total population of the 20 towns in Rif Dimashq had a total population greater than 2 million.

Renowned as a site of fierce resistance to the French occupation of Syria, and with its proximity to both the capital of Syria and the wilderness, the region has been, for decades, a safe haven for rebels against central authority. When the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011, Ghouta quickly became a focus of rebellion, with its population seething at the regime's agricultural policies and the appropriation of state lands for the benefit of regime cronies. The region has been dominated by the opposition since 2012, leading the regime to respond with a siege on these areas. Today, approximately 400,000 Syrians live in Ghouta and have so far refused to budge from their homes even under Syrian bombardment and a siege which has at times threatened to starve the people of Ghouta.

Reasons for the Latest Escalation

Alongside Idlib, the countryside to the north of Homs and the southwestern region of Syria^[1], Eastern Ghouta was subject to a ceasefire brokered by numerous international players beginning at the end of 2016 to establish “De-Escalation Zones” throughout Syria. The decision to extend the ceasefire to Eastern Ghouta came into force after a July, 2017 agreement signed in Cairo between Russia and the Jaysh Al Islam, one of two large armed opposition groups which dominated Eastern Ghouta. The same agreement also paved the way for official recognition of Jaysh Al Islam, the leader of which, Mohammed Alloush, was part of the official opposition delegation to the Syrian peace talks in the Kazakh capital Astana last year—against the protests of both Tehran and even Damascus^[2].

The idea behind the internationally supported “De-Escalation Zones” in Syria was to prepare the groundwork for a wider political settlement to Syria’s revolution-cum-civil war, some aspects of which have become increasingly visible through international meetings such as in Astana and later (January 2018) in Sochi, Russia. Moscow had intended for this series of international peace conferences for Syria to replace the parallel track of talks hosted in Geneva which has thus far not produced any tangible results, notwithstanding UN Security Council Resolution (2254). Assuming that the de-escalation zones were not a tactical ploy by the Syrian regime and its backers to pacify a series of regions before sweeping in and capturing them, it appears that Russia has become an accomplice to the destruction of the peace arrangements which itself helped to broker. This is possibly in response to a series of setbacks which Russian foreign policy in Syria has faced, and which otherwise would harm his image as the Russian president seeks to secure a further term in office.

Only days after a triumphal visit by Putin to the Russian-controlled airbase in Hmimim, on the Syrian coast, in which he seemed to be posturing like a victor in Syria, the very same airbase was bombed by the Syrian opposition. Using a small fleet of drones, the Syrian opposition was able to destroy seven Russian jets that had been stationed on the ground in January of 2018. The following month, the Syrian opposition used a shoulder-launched missile to shoot down a Russian Sukhoi over the skies of Idlib. Moscow has previously pointed the finger at the United States for standing behind what it alleged were “coordinated” attacks aimed at damaging its prestige following Russian military victory in Syria.

The gloves came off when US planes attacked members of a Russian private security firm (which had previously deployed its mercenaries to Ukraine) on their way to attack the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces on the outskirts of Deir ez Zor. The strike was a massive blow the Kremlin, which at first tried to completely ignore the incident. Eventually, the Russian Foreign Ministry did acknowledge the

deaths of five of its nationals in hostilities in Syria, but asserted that none of them were part of the official Russian military force in the country.

An additional strain on Russia has been the announcement of a new US strategy, announced by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on 17 January after the defeat of ISIL across the Fertile Crescent became apparent. Speaking on Syria policy issues, Tillerson explained that Washington would not repeat the mistakes of Iraq, whereby it withdrew its forces the moment its combat role was over, and effectively handed Iraq over to Iran. Tillerson went on to detail five objectives for the United States in Syria^[31]:

- Preventing the re-emergence of either ISIL or Al Qaeda in Syrian territory, which they could use as a base to plan attacks on US interests.
- Finding a political resolution to the conflict in Syria, through UN-led mediation efforts which preserves the country's territorial integrity. Additionally, ensuring that Assad has no role in the country's future.
- Containing and limiting Iranian influence and Syria and across the wider region.
- Making possible the return of Syrian refugees and displaced persons who left their homes since the outbreak of hostilities.
- Freeing Syria of all weapons of mass destruction.

For Moscow, Washington's new policy is a seeming act of belligerence, and a threat to its interests in Syria. The US declined to take part in the Sochi Conference, even as an observer, and attempted to pressure the opposition into boycotting the talks as well. Washington also joined Jordan, France, the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia in forming a multilateral committee which set out a vision for peace in Syria which was at odds with the adopted communique from Sochi.

The remarkable deterioration in Moscow's relations with the US drove the Russians to the conclusion that only a military solution could end the conflict in Eastern Ghouta. Instead of seeking compromise and conciliation, Russian military planners would aim for a complete defeat of the Syrian opposition.

UN Security Council Resolution 2401

Despite Russian stalling and delays, the UN Security Council adopted the text of Resolution 2401 on Friday, 23 February. The text, drafted by Sweden and Kuwait (which at the time was the President of the Security Council) called for an immediate cessation of hostilities covering a 30-day period as well as the provision of humanitarian corridors to deliver aid to Eastern Ghouta. To avoid a Russian veto at the Security Council, however, a number of substantive changes to the text were made. The new, modified text does not contain, for example, the requirement that the ceasefire begin “within 72 hours” of its passage at the Security Council but merely that all parties end hostilities “without delay”^[4]. Russian influence was further in evidence in the fact that the text is not an explicit, specific attempt to tackle the situation in Eastern Ghouta, but instead applies to all Syrian territory. Finally, Russia insisted on a stated exception to activities against ISIL and other designated extremist groups from the ceasefire—this despite the fact that Moscow had previously rejected an offer by the Al Nusra Front to voluntarily withdraw its limited number of fighters from Eastern Ghouta. Additionally, Moscow has attempted to circumvent the Resolution’s provision of corridors enabling access to humanitarian and medical aid by offering a more limited, five-hour (from 09:00 to 14:00 local time) ceasefire during which the civilians of Eastern Ghouta are permitted to leave before shelling resumes for another 19 hours. For many, this is a clear indication of Russia’s attempts to bring about another mass displacement of Syrians from their homes and cities.

Sources of Resistance

With the benefit of hindsight, and with the experience of East Aleppo behind them, the leadership of the Syrian opposition has already offered to evacuate the Al-Nusra fighters and their families from Eastern Ghouta (numbering a total of 250 individuals in a region of 400,000 at least). While openly professing to welcome the gesture, Russia has in fact worked hard to obstruct its implementation. In fact, Moscow seeks to wipe out the final pockets of armed opposition to the regime in the region surrounding Damascus. Throughout the previous two years, the regime’s backers have already succeeded in pushing the armed opposition out of other regions, including Western Ghouta and other districts on the outskirts of the Syrian capital. Moscow’s Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, has already explicitly made clear that the solution to the siege in Eastern Ghouta, as Russia sees it, is to repeat the pattern of the East Aleppo siege in which the opposition fighters and the civilian population both were pushed towards the Idlib Governorate.

This time may turn out differently, however. The region surrounding Eastern Ghouta enjoys far greater ability to withstand an onslaught from the regime and its supporting forces than what prevailed in Aleppo. One major difference is that most, if not all, of the opposition fighters who are now based in East Ghouta are

natives of the region and know the layout of the land. This partly explains why the regime has thus far failed to penetrate the area, even after five full years of fighting. Additionally, the opposition forces in Eastern Ghouta are numerous and well prepared. There are an estimated 10,000 opposition fighters heavily armed with a store stocked from years of raiding regime arsenals. Faced with the prospect of a humiliating retreat and having witnessed the fate of those who went before them and who opted to withdraw from earlier battlefields and who today continue to be bombed in Idlib, opposition fighters in Eastern Ghouta may decide not to leave at all. In resolving to stay put, the fighters in Eastern Ghouta will be assisted by a network of subterranean tunnels which according to some reports have allowed entire towns to move underground as well as the agrarian expertise of the local residents, all of which have combined to make resistance to the regime possible for so long.