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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Aleppo Defies the Imposition of Russia's Will on the Syrian People

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2016

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Introduction

Since April 22, the Syrian city of Aleppo has been subjected to massive bombardment by the jets of the Assad regime and the Russians. The city's markets, clinics, medical centers, schools, and other civilian infrastructure have all been hit. More than 250 people have been killed and 1,500 injured. The carnage has forced thousands of civilians to flee their homes and head for the surrounding countryside.

This bombing campaign is the main development in the field since the ceasefire agreement formulated by US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 22, 2016, which subsequently went into effect on February 27. Areas controlled by ISIL and the Nusra Front were excluded from the ceasefire. Given that the areas of Aleppo currently under bombardment are not controlled by those two groups, targeting them in such violent fashion is reprehensible, even in the context of the more than 2,000 violations of the ceasefire perpetrated by the regime in various parts of Syria over the eight weeks since it went into effect. While it is true that the Nusra Front are among the many factions in the city of Aleppo, the bombardment, which has not spared hospitals, makes no distinction between them, or even between fighters and civilians. This prompts a series of questions: why are civilian neighborhoods of Aleppo controlled by the Syrian opposition being targeted? Why is Russia providing cover for this vicious attack, and even participating in it, in gross violation of the very ceasefire agreement it is supposed to be sponsoring? Why is Moscow determined to exclude Aleppo from the "tacit agreement" between the US and Russia that covers regions of Rif Damascus and Latakia, and continues to refuse to put pressure on the regime to stop the attack on Aleppo?

Resuming Attempts to Besiege Aleppo?

Bombarding opposition-controlled areas of Aleppo appears to mark the resumption of the plan to completely besiege the city, a plan halted in February by the ceasefire agreement that paved the way for the launch of round two of the Geneva III talks on January 29, 2016. The bombardment is also aimed at forcing the remaining inhabitants to leave, and pressurizing the armed Syrian opposition in Aleppo to acquiesce to Russian conditions for negotiations.

In the wake of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254 of December 18, 2015, which stipulated the implementation of the road map included in the Vienna

Agreement to end the Syrian crisis, Russia mounted a major military offensive to improve the regime's negotiating position prior to the resumption of talks in Geneva. As a result, regime forces, backed by Iranian fighters and militias from Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere, achieved breakthroughs in northern Rif Aleppo, with Russia throwing its weight behind overturning the balance of forces in favor of its allies, taking advantage of US acceptance of its Syria policy.

Besieging opposition fighters in Aleppo and cutting their supply lines with Turkey were priority tactical goals for the Russians. To this end, Russia provided air cover for a major military offensive in northern Rif Aleppo that started at the end of January 2016. This succeeded on February 3 in shutting the "corridor" linking the town of Azaz, situated on the Turkish-Syrian border, with al-Qasm, which is controlled by the opposition from Aleppo.

Concurrently, the "Syrian Democratic Forces" with Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) as their backbone, under heavy covering fire from Russian planes, launched an advance from Afrin in the east and tightened the squeeze on the Aleppo-Azaz highway at the expense of the Syrian opposition forces taking on ISIL. On February 10, fighters belonging to "The Revolutionary Army", a group under the umbrella of the "Syrian Democratic Forces", were able to take control of the strategic Menagh airbase in the northern Rif Damascus on the Aleppo-Azaz highway. They continued to advance north and east at the expense of Syrian opposition forces towards the Turkish border, and on February 15, took control of the town of Tel Rifaat, one of the key strongholds of the Syrian opposition in northern Aleppo, before Turkish artillery halted their advance on Azaz.

Following the success of the regime forces in cutting the Aleppo-Azaz highway, most predictions regarding Russian strategy suggested a regime offensive starting from Khan Tuman to the southwest of Aleppo heading towards Idlib and on to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, so cutting the final supply line to al-Qasm, which was held by the opposition from Aleppo, and completing Aleppo's encirclement.¹

However, the ceasefire formulated by Obama and Putin on February 22 temporarily halted plans to complete the siege on Aleppo. At that time, the ceasefire revealed

¹ "Russian Military Strategy across Syria, Negotiating Tactics in Geneva," Policy Analysis Unit, Assessment Report, ACRPS, February 2, 2016, at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/188971b9-09f3-46e7-8409-02d12388d827>.

differences in the position of elements in the regime front: Russia believed it had proved its military capabilities by enabling the regime to make important breakthroughs against the opposition, and that it was time to reap the political fruits of this in its relations with Washington. Russia believes also that it was time to deal with its fears over an escalation by allies of the opposition who had expressed their refusal to accept defeat. The regime and its Iranian allies, who had been able to flex their muscles because of Russian intervention, insisted on continuing to put pressure on the opposition, in the hope of defeating them militarily, and then being able to present themselves as the only party able to take on and defeat ISIL. This enables us to understand Bashar al-Assad's statements concerning his determination to reassert control over all the territory lost to the opposition, and subsequently, the response of the Permanent Representative of Russia to the UN in which he asked Assad to step back into line.

A Strategy to Impose the Russian Solution

Once Russia had demonstrated its military might, the prevailing belief was that it would seek to demonstrate its ability to implement a political solution to the Syrian crisis. The solution Russia decided to pursue started to become clear during US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Moscow at the end of March, where he met with President Putin. Kerry's trip sought to take advantage of the momentum provided by Putin's decision to withdraw a portion of his forces from Syria on March 15, a move widely understood as a Russian attempt to pressurize Assad into accepting a political settlement. Russian intervention had not just prevented Assad's military collapse, but had also produced "a relative change" to the balance of forces on the ground in his favor.²

During their meeting, the Russians sensed that Kerry was wavering over the demand for Assad to go during the transition period, so they proposed that Assad be allowed to remain, and even be allowed to stand in the elections scheduled for the end of the transition period. In exchange, there would be constitutional amendments and the Syrian political system would be turned from presidential to parliamentary. This would mean that the president is elected by parliament, rather than by the people, and would enjoy only ceremonial powers, while the broad-based government to be formed from

² "Russian Withdrawal from Syria: Is the Clock Ticking for Assad?" Policy Analysis Unit, Assessment Report, ACRPS, March 21, 2016. at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/fed50292-307c-4677-a556-62e38e841462>.

the regime, the opposition, and independents would enjoy powers currently the prerogative of the president of the republic, including control of the army and security forces. It seems that Kerry agreed to the Russian proposal, and that the focus for the coming stage should be amending or re-writing the constitution, rather than the transitional governing authority and the question of Assad's future as the opposition was demanding, and that this should be completed by the beginning of August 2016.³

During the third round of indirect talks in Geneva, which began in mid-April, Moscow tried to make the opposition accept the precedence of constitutional amendments and the formation of a broad-based government, thereby adopting the viewpoint of the Syrian regime president who sees the political transition as meaning a transition from one constitution to another. Moscow tried to put pressure on the opposition to accept this proposal by ratcheting up the military pressure both before and during the negotiations. It also used humanitarian issues, such as supplying food aid to besieged areas, and the release of male and female prisoners mandated in Articles 12 and 13 of UN Resolution 2254, which were supposed to be outside the practical framework of the talks.

However, the High Negotiating Committee (HNC) stuck to its position calling for the creation of a transitional governing authority without Assad, and then suspended its participation in the talks in response to pressure from the military factions, particularly Ahrar al-Sham, who refused to allow the negotiations to become cover for the violations that the regime and its allies were committing on the ground. This drove Russia to raise the pressure on two levels. First, in the field, the vicious bombardment of Aleppo resumed in parallel with renewed efforts to impose an all-out siege by cutting the Castillo highway (the only supply route linking the opposition areas with the Bab al-Hawa crossing on the Turkish border). Kurdish YPG units, backed by regime forces and Russian air support, tried to cut the highway starting from the Kurdish-majority Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood, some 4km from the road itself. Second, on the political level, Russia has resumed pressure to have Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, whose representative heads the delegation to the Geneva talks, designated as terrorist groups. In parallel, Russia has resumed its effort to undermine the legitimacy of the HNC as the representative of the Syrian opposition and break its monopoly on the opposition's seats

³ "The US and Russia Come to Terms on Assad's Future," Policy Analysis Unit, Assessment Report, ACRPS, April 18,

2016, at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/5ba1869a-2963-487f-9232-e30943f5f1c4>.

at the negotiations, manufacturing a broad front of Russian-affiliated opposition forces, including the Moscow conference group, the Cairo and Astana conference groups, and the Hamimim group. Therefore, and despite the HNC's suspension of its participation in the Geneva talks, Russia has tried to create the impression that negotiations are moving ahead, irrespective of the boycott by the HNC, while the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura continues to meet and consult with "opposition" delegations close to Moscow at the Geneva talks.

Conclusion

The savage bombardment of Aleppo represents a new Russian attempt to impose its preferred political outcome. In doing so, Moscow is taking advantage of the lack of US opposition to its pressure on the Syrian opposition to accept any solution that allows efforts to be focused on fighting ISIL, and that pushes Russia to enhance its cooperation on that issue taking on a bigger share of the burden. There is a possibility that Russia, in cooperation with Kurdish militias and regime forces and their allied militias, will succeed in cutting the Castillo highway and impose a total blockade of the opposition-held areas of Aleppo. However, this will not definitely lead to the fall of the city, nor will it necessarily facilitate its invasion, since the latter would require tens of thousands of fighters to wage urban warfare amongst piles of concrete. Such resources are not available to the regime, even if fighting stopped on all other fronts, and Assad mobilized the entirety of his forces for an assault on Aleppo. Moreover, such an operation would incur enormous human losses to the regime, which could neither be sustained nor replaced. It is sufficient to recall that the regime was unable to retake control of small neighborhoods around Damascus, such as Jobar and Barza, despite a heavy bombardment and Russian and Iranian support for the regime. This means that the savage assault on Aleppo, and the deliberate snuffing out of life in the city, is merely another attempt to persuade the opposition to accept the solution Russia wants, and that perhaps the Americans want too, even if that comes at the price of the destruction of Aleppo and its inhabitants.