



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Is the Regime about to Lose Control of Aleppo?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | April 2014

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Introduction

Developments have been accelerating in Aleppo since the beginning of April. Armed opposition units have launched a multi-pronged offensive south and east of the city, and have succeeded in making breakthroughs that have helped change the balance of forces inside and around the city. This analysis sheds light on developments in Syria, including the recent advances in Aleppo. It also tries to assess the military achievements of the opposition forces, and explores what significance they have for the wider struggle in Syria.

The Situation Post–Geneva II

The Geneva II Conference failed to launch a political process that could lead to the formation of a “transitional authority with full powers” to help ease the humanitarian suffering crippling Syria. Although the sponsoring parties and states concerned by the crisis did not want to declare the conference a failure, to find an alternative policy for dealing with Syria, efforts to convene a third session of negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition have failed. The US and Russia remain in disagreement on many issues, including differences over who bears the responsibility for the breakdown in negotiations, the priorities for the negotiation process, the form and requirements of the final solution, and the future of President Bashar al-Assad.

With the world now focused on Ukraine, the faltering Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, the Iranian nuclear program talks, and other pressing world events, the Syrian crisis has taken backstage, reduced to occasional references on “developments on the ground” that cannot be addressed politically in the absence of any prospect for a solution in the foreseeable term.

While awaiting renewed regional and international interest in Syria, the two sides in the Syrian conflict have taken it in their own hands to shift matters on the ground by military means. The regime has persevered with its strategy of isolating armed action to remote regions while ensuring the geographical contiguity of Damascus, the center of the country, and the coast. With the active support of Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, the regime escalated its military campaign in Qalamun and reasserted control over most of its towns and villages, including Yabrud, Ras al-Maara, Rankos, Asal al-Ward, Hosh Arab, and Maaloun. In this vital region, only the besieged al-Zabadani and some villages in Wadi Barda remain outside of the regime’s control. This has coincided with a

tightening of the siege on the southern neighborhoods in Damascus and the opposition's forced agreement to truces and reconciliations, as happened with the Yarmuk camp, Beibla, and al-Hajar al-Aswad.

The regime also launched an offensive against the town of al-Mleha to press the siege on the Western Ghota after opposition brigades had been able to partially lift the siege at the beginning of 2014. In Homs, the regime took control of Krak des Chevaliers, which is close to the Homs-Tartous highway on March 20, 2013, thereby ending the opposition's presence and effectiveness throughout western and southern rural Homs. As a result, the opposition broke the truce in the old city of Homs brokered by the UN,¹ and, on April 15, 2014, announced a large military operation to retake it.

Because of the decline in outside support, opposition fighting units have found that taking on the regime is only possible by making breakthroughs on highly sensitive fronts such as the coast. New coalitions have also been formed that ignore the reservations of outside backers and openly coordinate with jihadi movements, some of which are designated as terrorist, such as the al-Nusra Front.

The armed opposition have made important advances on three fronts:

- **The Coast:** on March 21, 2013, and in coordination with some local units, Islamic brigades (the Free Syrians and Ansar al-Sham) and jihadi brigades (al-Nusra Front and the Islamic Movement of Sham) launched al-Anfal, a military operation in the coastal region. They took control of Kasab and its border crossing to Turkey, the area around al-Burj 45, and other important large villages, such as al-Burdusiya, which is located on the Ras Basit-Kasab road used by the regime to supply its forces. Despite the regime's ongoing efforts and the reinforcements it has sent to the region, it has been unable to regain these losses.
- **Khan Shaykhun and Morek:** Units of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in cooperation with the Eman brigades of the Free Syrians movement and the al-Nusra Front have taken control of most of the checkpoints in the town of Khan Shaykhun. This is viewed as a major achievement given the importance of the

¹ The neighborhoods of the old city in Homs have no effect on military action in Homs, and are discounted of their importance in military calculations because they have been under siege for over a year. What has made some fighters remain and bunker down is its symbolism as the capital of the Syrian revolution.

town, which is located on the Damascus-Aleppo highway and used by the regime as a base for deploying its forces in the southern countryside of Idlib and the northern countryside of Hama. It is also close to important military bases like Wadi al-Dayf and al-Hamdiya, which the opposition has held for two years. In parallel, the regime's efforts to retake Morek in the northern Hama countryside, and so open the supply route to its forces in Khan Shaykhun and rural Idlib, have failed. In this battle, American TOW anti-tank missiles have been used for the first time.

- **Aleppo:** The Joint Chamber of Military Operations for Al Sham People in Aleppo and other groups of the FSA have made significant military breakthroughs that have redrawn the military map inside the city and in the countryside, and tipped the balance in their favor.

What is Happening in Aleppo?

Aleppo remains deeply embedded in Syria's power struggle, particularly with Hezbollah's active involvement in the battle for Qusayr in the middle of last year, the regime's reassertion of control over the strategic town of Khanasar at the beginning of October 2013, and the reopening of the international highway to supplies for its forces besieged in the city of Aleppo. In early 2014, this was followed by the outbreak of armed clashes between units of the FSA, Islamic brigades, and al-Nusra Front, on the one side, and, on the other, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These clashes spread to various parts of Syria including Aleppo and its countryside, and reflected negatively on the capacity of the opposition forces.

The defeat of ISIS led it to withdraw from important fronts in Aleppo, such as al-Naqarin, Sheikh Najjar, and the industrial zone, thereby allowing the regime army to regain their control. As the regime forces advanced on these fronts and tightened its control over Dawar al-Lirmon (see Map 1), the situation tipped in its favor, with the opposition-held neighborhoods in Aleppo threatened with besiegement and capture. This was coupled with daily barrel bombings of opposition-held areas, which led to hundreds of civilian deaths and the flight of thousands to the countryside or the refugee camps in Turkey.²

² The Syrian Human Rights Network has documented at least 541 deaths as a result of barrel bombs alone (excluding missiles and artillery) from February 22, 2014 (the date Security Council Resolution 2139



Map 1: Supply Routes in Syria: Map 1 shows the regime's success in opening the supply route outside Aleppo, the Safira road, and cutting the opposition supply route from the Aleppo countryside via Kafr Hamra and Haritan.

In the face of this threat, the Joint Command for the Syrian People was formed on February 26, 2014, and included the Mujahideen Army (the major units of the FSA in Aleppo and its countryside), the Islamic Front, and the al-Nusra Front. Operations began in many areas and neighborhoods, particularly the industrial zone of al-Naqarin, Azizah, Sheikh Said, Salah al-Din, and Hananu. In the first stage, from March 1 to

stipulated an end to random bombing) to April 16, 2014. Civilians make up 99 percent of the victims; of those killed, there were 163 children, 69 women, and four members of the civil defence. Only three fighters were killed.

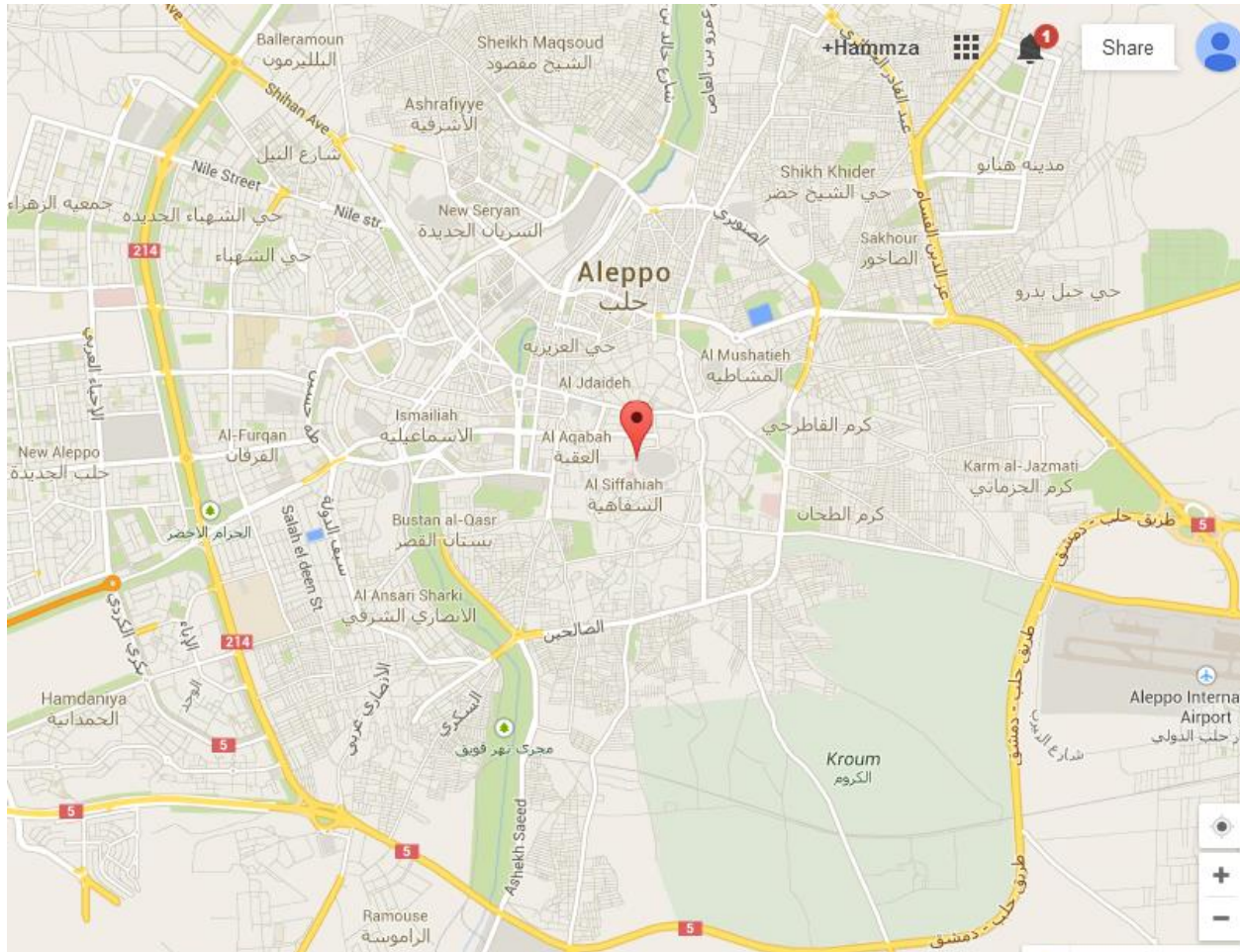
March 20, the regime's advance was deterred on all fronts. In the second stage, from March 20 to April 7, the units concentrated on attacking vital positions inside and outside the city, both those used by the regime as bases to bombard the neighborhoods and villages of the northern countryside, and those linked to the supply lines. In this context, the opposition was able to take over the highly-strategic Mount Shuwaykhna³ and the police headquarters overlooking the entrance to Aleppo's citadel, and recapture Dawar al-Lirmon and the main route leading to the western neighborhoods under the regime's control. In light of these accumulated successes, and to hedge against a regime counteroffensive, particularly with the outbreak of clashes on the coast, the opposition units tried to storm the neighborhoods under the control of regime forces and capture its main strongholds in the city of Aleppo.

According to estimates of the opposition brigades, there are around 8,000 fighters with the regime's forces in Aleppo distributed among the regime's army, the irregular national defense forces, the security services, and the police, in addition to 1,000 fighters from Hezbollah and other Iraqi and Iranian militias. The regime has six main centers that form the backbone of its forces in the city: the air force intelligence base in the al-Zahraa neighborhood, the Ramouse artillery base, the Assad Military Academy, the Hananu barracks, the Media City market, which has been converted into a military airstrip and barracks, and the branch of the political police in Suleimaniya, as well as Neirab Airport outside the city.

The first three of the sites mentioned above were priority targets for the opposition since their neutralization would take the western part of Aleppo completely out of the regime's control. Starting from there, on April 7 the Joint Command launched into a battle, dubbed "God's sit-in," an offensive aimed at Aqrab and the Hikmah School, near the Ramouse artillery base. They cut the supply route between Ramouse and the military academy, which isolated these locations from each other (see Map 2). The opposition also succeeded in cutting the road that links New Aleppo and Aleppo International Airport, which reopened in January 2014 after the army succeeded in securing its surroundings. Simultaneously, the forces of the Joint Command, in cooperation with the Abu Ammara units and the Army of Émigrés and Supporters,

³ The importance of Mount Shuwaykhna derives from it being a main site for the regime's army to target the towns and villages around it in the northern Aleppo countryside. It also forms the main defensive line for the towns of Nabl and al-Zahraa, both majority Shiite and military strongholds for the regime and Hezbollah in rural Aleppo.

stormed the Jamaiat al-Zahraa neighborhood on the western edge of the city and laid siege to the air force intelligence headquarters located there.⁴



Map 2: Ramouse Road and the Western Neighborhoods: The road was severed in the recent clashes. Note the proximity of Jamaiat al-Zahraa to neighborhoods controlled by the regime, such as Ashrafiyah, New Aleppo, al-Shahba, and others.

Because the regime's forces in the city are weakened and spread thin on many fronts, recent developments have created an opportunity for opposition units operating in the

⁴ The branch of air force intelligence is a regime bastion in Aleppo because it runs military operations in the city and has great symbolism for the opposition as the main center for detention and torture.

city, who are not under the umbrella of the Joint Command, to escalate their actions. On April 12, 2014, the Freedom Brigades, in cooperation with the Sultan Murad Brigade, declared the battle for Kasab in order to remove regime forces from the buildings and sites where they are concentrated in the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud, Bustan al-Basha, and al-Sakhour. The opposition forces have made some breakthroughs, and on April 17, Islamic groups and FSA units launched an operation to storm the Hananu barracks, after having blown up three of its main buildings.

The Significance of the Opposition's Advances in Aleppo

If the opposition units succeed in capturing or neutralizing the military targets outlined above and cut the main supply routes, Aleppo will be out of the regime's control though this does not necessarily mean that it will fall entirely to the opposition in the foreseeable future. Key considerations warn against jumping to the conclusion that the regime is about to lose Aleppo.

To start with, the regime is still able to resupply its besieged forces by air, and can halt or delay the opposition's advances by using airborne weapons. This remains a major obstacle to opposition military action as they do not possess an anti-aircraft capability, and supportive states are reluctant to provide them. Second, the absence of a permanent supply of arms for the opposition needs to be considered. Most of the states backing the opposition refuse to provide the weapons needed by the Joint Command in Aleppo because of the al-Nusra Front's active participation. This is having a direct impact on the course of the confrontation. The funds earmarked by the Command to buy weapons are not sufficient to achieve victory in a city the size of Aleppo, as taking control of it would require vast amounts of ammunition. Lastly, the absence of effective coordination continues to be a key hindrance. The Joint Command is overseeing clashes on fronts in Ramouse, Jamaiat al-Zahraa, and in the old city of Aleppo. In other neighborhoods, most operations and clashes are improvised and devoid of coordination and planning. As a result, these cannot be built upon in the long term given the limited capabilities of the participating units and the absence of coordination between them and the units under the Joint Command.

Irrespective of the above, the opposition's achievements in Aleppo and its countryside have undeniably helped bring about relative changes to the overall military balance in northern Syria, and the regime is retreating in many locations. Even so, it is not possible to talk of a decisive transformation in the course of the conflict or a change in

its general picture. Given the regime's focus on what it considers the "central" region, and in the absence of a political resolution in the near future, the gravest implication of these developments is a stabilization of the military situation on the ground and the move toward an undeclared partition of Syria into areas controlled by either the regime or the opposition.