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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Battles to Break the Siege of Aleppo: Military and Political Implications

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Aug 2016

Battles to Break the Siege of Aleppo: Military and Political Implications

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Introduction

After a series of fierce battles, Syrian opposition forces were able to break the regime-imposed siege on the eastern districts of Aleppo after they took control of Castello Road in July 2016. Opposition forces succeeded in capturing some of the regime's key military strongholds in Aleppo, including the Artillery College, the Armaments College, and the Airforce Technical College. These gains turned the tables on the regime and its allies by besieging its forces inside the city. If the opposition can maintain these military gains, there are likely to be major implications for the struggle for Aleppo and for the Syrian situation as a whole.

Turnaround in the Field

The regime and its allies hoped, by copying the tactics used in Homs, to pre-empt chances at a Russian-American military coordination agreement. Their plan was that a "settlement" would be imposed on Aleppo by means of the strategy of "submit or starve," which the regime had followed in various parts of the country before. The result had been a "safe" exit of fighters with their light weapons, and meant the area was no longer part of the conflict equation. At the beginning of June 2016, regime forces began an effort to isolate opposition forces within small pockets of Aleppo and cutting their supply lines, especially with Turkey. The campaign –led by the regime and its allied militias backed by Russian airpower— began in the districts of al-Layramoun, Bani Zeid, al-Mallah, Castello, the Handarat Camp, and Kafr Hamra (see Table 1). For its offensive, the regime relied on three core units: the Nimr Forces commanded by Colonel Suhail al-Hassan, the Quds Brigade under Ahmed Jibril, and two brigades from the Fourth Division, supported by a number of other small militias. This assault successfully cut off supply lines of the Syrian opposition forces to Aleppo. By the morning of July 28, 2016, more than 300,000 civilians were under siege. It was then that the regime and the Russian leadership began promoting the idea of opening humanitarian corridors.

Table 1 Number of air sorties against opposition-held areas, used to impose the siege on Aleppo.

Time period	Russian Aircraft	Regime Aircraft	Regime Helicopters
June 28 to July 11	390	252	210
July 12 to July 26	474	323	212
July 27 to August 2	204	166	73
Total	1068	741	495
Percentage	46.3%	53.7%	

Source: Based on information from internal observers and the official websites of opposition forces and local councils that record airstrikes.

The imposition of a full siege on Aleppo by the regime would have had catastrophic political, military, and humanitarian results for the opposition. This forced coordination efforts, which in turn lead to a swift agreement that a unified opposition force would work to break the siege (see Table 2).

Table 2 Forces participating on both sides.

Opposition Forces		Regime and Allied Forces
Operations Room of Jaysh al-Fath Idlib, Comprising Seven Groups:	Operations Room of Fath Halab, Comprising 17 groups:	4 th Battalion Al-Quds Brigade
Fath al-Sham Front	Ansar al-Din Front, Suqour al-Jabal Brigade, Jaysh al-Islam, Northern Battalion, Central Battalion, Al-Shamia Front, Al-Safwa	

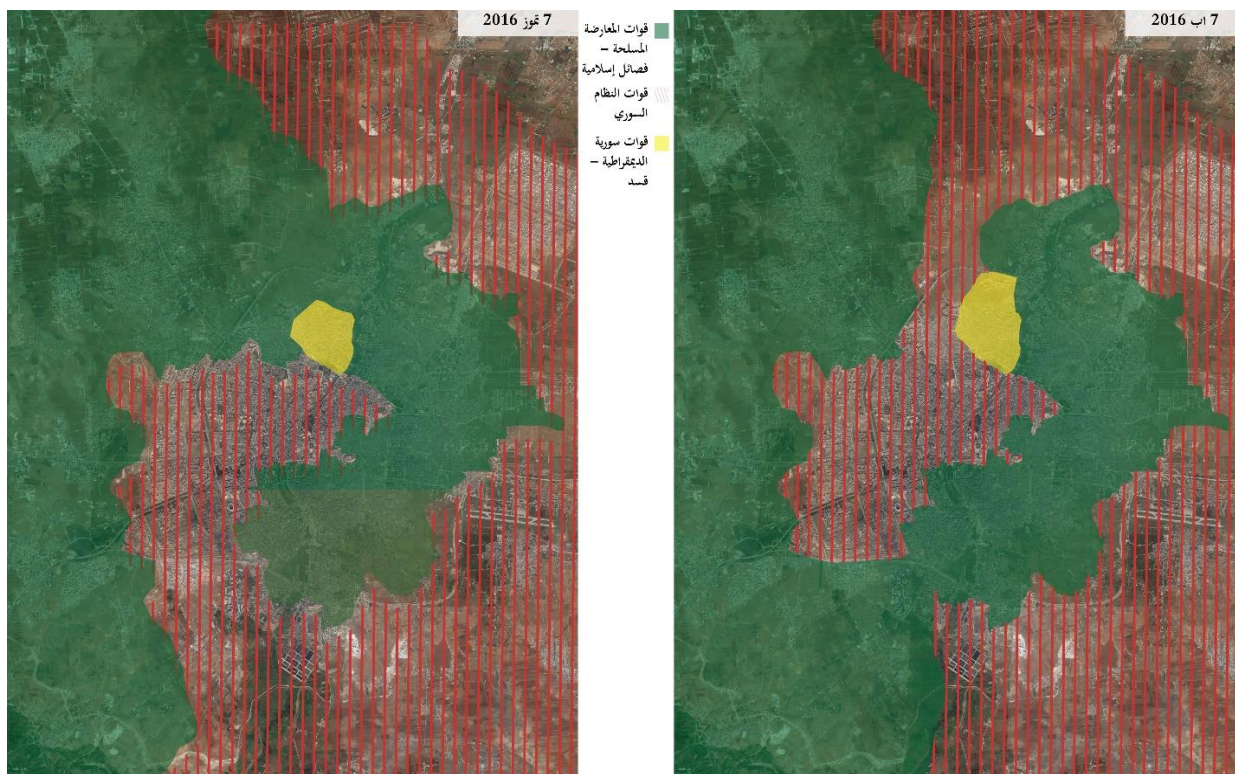
Ahrar Sham Movement	Islamic Rally, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, Syrian Revolutionaries Brigades, 101 st Infantry Division, Nur al-Din al-Zinki Movement, Jaysh al-Tahrir, Fastaqim Rally, Jaysh al-Nasr, 16 th Infantry Division, Al-Asala wa al-Tanmiya Front, Al-Fawj al-Awwal.	Al-Nimr forces
Jaysh al-Sunna		Hezbollah
Faylaq al-Sham		National Defense Committees
Al-Sham Committees		Badr Organization
Al-Haqq Brigade		Al-Nujaba Movement
Turkistan Islamist Party		

On August 3, 2016, opposition forces launched a major offensive against the regime concentrated in the 1070 Housing Project, al-Hikma school, the Muta, Ahad, the Mahrouqat Hills, and al-Amriyah.¹ At the end of the first day's fighting, the opposition announced its multistage plan to break the siege.

On August 6 2016, the opposition launched its offensive against the Airforce Technical College, the last staging post for the regime before the Ramouseh Highway. Simultaneously, opposition fighting units that were besieged inside the city launched an assault from the opposite direction, enabling the opposition to capture the Ramose Roundabout from inside regime lines and the Airforce Technical College from outside. This opened the road and broke the siege on the eastern districts of Aleppo.

¹ "Breaking the siege of Aleppo: Syrian opposition groups announce a wide-scale battle to save civilians," [Arabic] *Huffington Post Arabi*, July 7, 2016, <http://goo.gl/wW7LkP>, accessed August 10, 2016.

Source: Policy Analysis Unit, ACRPS



The Maps above (l-r) illustrate the changes in territory held between July 7 and August 7, 2016. The solid yellow represents PYD-held areas while the solid green represents the areas held by FSA-affiliated groups. Source: Policy Analysis Unit, ACRPS.

Factors behind the Breaking of the Siege

Notwithstanding the resurgence of military aid provided by the states which back the Syrian opposition, there is a confluence of factors which together combined to give the opposition its edge in the latest battles. The hope was that support would mean an end to the Aleppo siege, thus preventing the regime and its allies from exploiting the situation on the ground to strengthen its hand during forthcoming negotiations. It might therefore be said that the victory of the Syrian opposition in the battle for Aleppo is due to the combination of several factors:

Good Performance of Opposition Forces

- Good planning, the element of surprise, and deft handling of changes in the field.
- High-level coordination between the groups, which were subsumed under the command of the operations rooms of Fath Halab and Jaysh al-Fath at all stages of the battle. Fighting positions were allocated to participating groups, with each group responsible for its position.
- Use of heavy weapons and infiltration operations, which played a key role in opening the path for opposition fighters to enter the Armaments College and the Artillery College. This was because the heavy weapons enabled the removal of a large number of buildings and fortifications controlled by allied militias at the main gates.
- Popular support boosted morale and spurred on the opposition, particularly after hundreds of old tires were set on fire creating clouds of black smoke to provide cover from Russian fighter jets and the barrel-bombing helicopters of Assad's regime.

Poor Performance of the Regime and its Allies

- Failure to absorb the shock of the opposition attack. Losses to regime forces and allied militias over the course of six days exceeded 1,000 men and the destruction of dozens of pieces of equipment, four-wheel drive vehicles equipped with heavy and medium machineguns, armor-piercing missiles, plus tens of Cortina HEAT missile launchers and M57 mortars.²
- Largely ineffective Russian support, mainly due to the closeness of the lines of engagement and the speed of the opposition victory, despite the intensity of sorties over besieged areas and the indiscriminate targeting.

Transformation of the Nusra Front

During the fighting the Nusra Front presented itself as a Syrian group, and announced the severing of ties with al-Qaeda, proclaiming that henceforth it would be known as the Fath al-Sham Front. This transformation had an important effect on the battle to lift the siege on Aleppo, since it provided better conditions for coordination with the Front,

² "What are the losses to the regime forces in the battle to break the siege of Aleppo?" [Arabic] accessed at <http://all4syria.info/Archive/332337>

allaying fears over working with the former Nusra group, meaning they could work in cooperation to end the siege.

Expected Political and Military Implications

The latest fighting in Aleppo, which coincided with talks between Russia and the United States in Geneva on joint military coordination in Syria, indicates continuing differences and mistrust between Washington and Moscow. This mistrust was underscored in the statements of US President Barack Obama that came after the talks. Accordingly, and linked to the course of events in Aleppo, a series of expected repercussions will cast their shadow over the international arena's military and political equations.

In the field, opposition forces are expected to reinforce the line breaking the siege in the Ramouseh area and expand it toward the city center (as announced by Jaysh al-Fath on August 7).³ At the same time, they will reinforce the two fronts in southern Rif Aleppo and besiege the Iranian militias that are still attempting to reach the regime-loyalist towns of Kafriya and al-Fuah in Idlib. The opposition forces may try to continue advancing toward the city center and capture it. This latter aim seems more enticing because of the significant political and military gain it represents, especially in light of the heavy weapons the opposition forces acquired when they captured the Artillery College. Such a move would be very costly and would likely come up against international pressure to maintain the principle of a military stalemate. Whatever the case, a number of main features of the coming period can be inferred:

- The complete collapse of the truce and halt to hostilities. This means the return to confrontations across Syria, no longer confined to the regions of Aleppo and Rif Damascus as in the recent past.
- The regime and its allies will try to regain their losses and reimpose the siege on Aleppo. Accordingly, any gains at the moment are uncertain.
- Reinforcement of areas of influence and control, as well as growing conditions for the division of Syria, particularly if linked with the movements of the Kurdish Popular Defense Forces in northern Syria and the efforts of the regime to strengthen and consolidate its grip over the entire coastal front.

³ "Jaysh al-Fath declares start of battle to take all of Aleppo," news broadcast on Al Jazeera, August 8, 2016, <https://goo.gl/7FgZGp>, accessed on August 10, 2016.

- The failure of regime forces, given their rapid retreat and the serious crisis of human resources, to present themselves as a coherent centralized force in partnership with the international community to fight terrorism.
- The ineffectiveness of Russian air operations in the absence of an active land force able to act decisively.

On the political level, the battles for Aleppo will cast their shadow over talks, the date of whose third round has yet to be finalized. The political track will enter a phase of uncertainty prior to the US presidential elections, after which the newly elected president will need to clarify the position of the new administration. The battle for Aleppo also demonstrates renewed action on the part of the regional states backing the opposition. This marks a change after the decision to step back when Russian began its direct military intervention. This intervention had been an attempt by the regime and allied forces to make the political process fail, and at the same time to promote the idea of its “objective” participation in the war on terror. This tactic, initially used as leverage to gain legitimacy internationally, seems to have lost its effect.

Conclusion

In breaking the siege of Aleppo the Syrian opposition forces achieved a stunning victory that was entirely unexpected by its opponents. Its actions turned the tables on Russia and Iran and lead to a situation where it was the regime that was besieged, with pressure on Assad and his forces to surrender. This victory was the result of coordination of efforts, precise planning, and agreement over a unified aim. Nevertheless, it is still premature to celebrate, as major challenges remain. Preparations are underway for another major battle for Aleppo. It may be time for opposition forces to consider the image they present as a disciplined fighting force that adheres to the rules and ethics of war. Instead, the forces might be better served in the long run by presenting an acceptable alternative government that is capable of running the country.