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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Fall of Aleppo and the Moscow Declaration

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Dec 2016

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

The Syrian regime, in concert with foreign sectarian militia and with the aid of intensive Russian aerial support, has managed to push various armed Syrian opposition groups from Eastern Aleppo, which they had previously controlled for four years. The fall of Eastern Aleppo was accompanied by the evacuation of thousands of civilians who had sheltered there. Immediately after the opposition's withdrawal, Russia convened a meeting bringing together the Foreign and Defense ministers of Iran and Turkey with their Russian counterparts. The outcome of that meeting, later named the "Moscow Declaration" by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov – provides a detailed roadmap to end the Syrian crisis.

The Fall of Aleppo

The armed Syrian opposition began trying to break the regime siege on the eastern region of the wider Aleppo area since Assad forces first captured the "Castillo Road"—the last remaining supply route to the opposition-held districts—in July, 2016. Following an early success the following month, Russian aerial bombardment progressively destroyed the opposition forces¹. Following a ceasefire brokered by Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry and, which took effect on October 28, Moscow hosted a summit which brought together the foreign ministers from Tehran (Javad Zarif and Damascus (Walid Mualem) to meet with field commanders from the three main pro-regime powers. The military plan chiseled out by Russia in coordination with representatives of the Syrian and Iranian regimes was put into action immediately after the election of Donald Trump to the White House on November 8. The success of that plan, and the ensuing military collapse of the Syrian opposition, can be attributed to a number of factors:

- 1) The massive firepower unleashed by the Russian military against the Syrian opposition. This included the bolstering of Russian ground forces in Syria as well as the increased deployment of Russian bomber planes and the Russian North Fleet, which includes the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*. The aircraft carrier made its way to the Eastern Mediterranean between October and November

¹ See "The Battles to Break the Siege of Aleppo: Military and Political Implications", *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, August 22, 2016, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/fa9e7c24-694c-4133-9c35-1e7e9b0b5c1c>

2016 and was used to launch cruise missile strikes against opposition strongholds in Aleppo.

- 2) Following a tactic first deployed against the opposition in Homs in 2014, the Assad regime imposed a “submit or starve” blockade on the nearly 300,000 civilians living in opposition-held areas east of Aleppo. The fallout of this blockade meant that the leadership of the armed opposition was forced to go to the negotiating table.
- 3) Internal discord between various armed opposition groups which remained unchanged even as the regime and its allies bombed Aleppo. This was illustrated most clearly in the conflict between the Noureddine Zanki Movement and the group known as the “Fa Istaqim Kama Omirt” Battalions (the name is a Koranic injunction to “be righteous as you have been commanded”), as well as the conflicts which have pitted the Fateh Al Sham (formerly known as the “Nusra Front”) against a variety of other Islamist opposition groups. In contrast, the chorus of pro-Assad military forces—which contained the military forces of Syria, Iran and Russia as well as paramilitary groups from abroad—seemed perfectly orchestrated, up to and at least until the Russian-American brokered evacuation of Syrian civilians holed up in Aleppo.
- 4) The diversion of some of the armed opposition groups towards the Turkish-backed “Operation Euphrates Shield” which sought to push ISIL forces out of regions it controlled to the west of the Euphrates. This was to prevent in the former ISIL strong hold of Al Bab a repeat of events which took place in Manbij, where territories once held by ISIL fell into the hands of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a group dominated by Kurdish separatist factions and supported by the United States.
- 5) The relative lack of determination of the United States and other countries supportive of the opposition in general gave Russia added leeway in Syria. Russia was also emboldened by the election of Donald Trump, who had publicly announced his desire for a partnership with Moscow in Syria which would be aimed at tackling ISIL. Notably, the resumption of Russian air strikes against opposition targets in Aleppo and its use of the *Admiral Kutzensov* followed on from a perfunctory telephone call from Putin to Trump following on from the November election, a conversation which the Kremlin later announced had touched on the question of tackling “extremists” in Syria.

- 6) The transformation of Turkey's role, from one of outright support for the opposition and an engaged party to the conflict to a mediator between the Syrian opposition and Russia. The shift in Ankara's position was evident with the deposition of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in May of this year, but the pace of the transformation rapidly accelerated following Turkey's failed coup attempt in July. Notable illustrations of a new understanding between Ankara and Moscow include how Russia remained silent as Turkey cooperated with Syrian opposition forces to block the advance of Kurdish armed groups into the northeast of the Aleppo Governorate, just as Turkey failed to intervene when Russia supported the regime capture of East Aleppo. In the end, Ankara mediated the discussions between Russia and Syrian opposition forces to coordinate the evacuation of refugees from formerly rebel held districts of Aleppo.

A Russian – Turkish Détente: the View from Tehran

An international outcry over the use of summary executions by pro-regime armed groups in the battle to reclaim Aleppo, along with the destruction of one of the oldest continuously inhabited centers of civilization, led to fears of a massive massacre on the scale of Srebrenica. This forced Russia to accept a Turkish proposal to see the creation of safe corridors to evacuate civilians from the city. Feeling sidelined, and surprised by these new machinations, Tehran tried to stop the agreement in its tracks by means of its proxies on the ground, including Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Iraqi An Nujabaa militia. The Iranian view, echoed by the Assad regime in Damascus, did not distinguish between "moderate" and "extremist" opposition fighters, and held that the entire city of Aleppo should be cleansed of forces which took up arms against the Assad regime².

While they could not stop the deal, the Iranians managed to secure, as a precondition for its implementation, an agreement that its loyalists would be allowed to leave the towns of Kefraya (not to be confused with the town in the Bekaa Valley) and Foua in the Idlib Governorate, which have been under siege since the opposition Army of Conquest ("Jaish Al Fateh") captured the city of Idlib in the spring of 2015. The consequent compromise saw the light of day as UN Security Council Resolution 2328, sponsored by France and passed on December 19, and which envisaged the mutual exchange of civilian populations to take place under international supervision. Yet even

² "Iran Criticizes (UN Security Council) Resolution 2328", Mohammed Saleh Sadqian, *Al Hayat* (print edition), December 21, 2016, available online (Arabic): <https://goo.gl/oPgTrf>

this compromised resolution came in for criticism from the Iranian authorities, with Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary General of Iran's National Security Council decriing UNSC 2328 as "fueling tension in Syria"³.

The Moscow Declaration

With Aleppo now firmly in its grip, Moscow was quick to make the most of developments⁴ on the ground, as well as to utilize the near total absence of the United States, which has been in the midst of a transition of power since November. Even the assassination of Moscow's ambassador to Turkey did not stall the six-party deliberations which the Russians were to host on the following day. Notably absent at the dialogue table was the Syrian regime.

The discussions, which concluded in Moscow on December 20 with the adoption of the Moscow Declaration, explored the political future of Syria. One of the tenets of the Declaration was an explicit statement that there could be no military resolution of the Syrian conflict. The text also acknowledges the involvement of opposition groups—with the exception of the Nusra Front and ISIL—into a political dialogue with the present regime over the future of Syria. Particularly remarkable was the explicit recognition of international agreements, including UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Today, Moscow is working to expand the ceasefire which took hold in Aleppo across the rest of Syria, and to prepare the ground for an upcoming political process.

Although Moscow sought to depict the discussions it hosted as amicable, and as having ended in a consensus, stark differences between the parties to the agreement were clearly evident. One specific bone of contention was the interpretation of a text in UNSC Resolution 2254 (December 18, 2015)⁵, which stipulated an end to supplies of armed groups by international parties. While the Turkish foreign minister stressed the importance that such an understanding cover also armed groups aligned with the regime such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, his Iranian counterpart disputed the fact that the text of international agreements only covered groups designated terrorist

³ "UN resolution on Aleppo to fuel tension in Syria: Iran senior official", Press-TV, December 21, 2016, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/12/21/500879/Iran-Syria-Aleppo-resolution-Shamkhani>

⁴ For a full text of UNSC Resolution 2328, see: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2328\(2016\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2328(2016))

⁵ For a full text of UNSC Resolution 2254, see: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254(2015))

organizations by international law—a clear reference to the anti-regime ISIL and Nusra Front. The Iranian defense minister also took time after the meeting in Moscow to praise the results of Iranian-Russian military cooperation in Aleppo—a sentiment clearly at odds with the spirit of the Moscow Declaration, with its disavowal of a military solution to the Syrian crisis.⁶

Conclusion

Russia will now attempt to leverage the Moscow Declaration to translate the military prowess on display in Aleppo into diplomatic influence which can be used to conclude a peace agreement. Russian efforts to present some level of optimism about this latest agreement notwithstanding, the conditions necessary for peace to take hold in Syria remain absent: the same set of circumstances which led to the failure of UN Security Council Resolutions 2118 and 2254 as well as the Geneva II and Geneva III communiqués continue to hold. A number of specific questions remain unanswered: how can there be true peace in Syria if Russia and Iran continue to insist that Assad must remain in power? How exactly will a resolution be found in Syria if there is no Arab role in that country? What role will the United States play, given that regional powers have so far appeared able to seize the initiative and marginalize Washington? Finally, how will the Syrian armed opposition react when faced with a rhetoric which sees only terrorism as the problem but which neglects the fundamental causes which gave rise to that terrorism?

There are no clear answers to these questions, which means the conflict in Syria will persist until the circumstances which could see it end are satisfied. No doubt, the three countries which signed the Moscow Declaration do have the power to arrive at a ceasefire and expand it further out from Aleppo to cover the rest of the country. Russia, too, may be tempted to move slightly away from Iran in Syria, following a period of total alignment between the two countries on the ground in Syria, in order to become a mediator and help see the conflict end. At the end of the day, Moscow cannot continue to fight forever and is keen to see some kind of resolution to the Syrian crisis. Meanwhile, the armed Syrian opposition lacks the clout to bring its demands for a solution with even a modicum of justice to the table: such a demand would require the ability to plan strategically and the discipline to accept and implement common aims.

⁶ See “UN: Civilians fleeing Fallujah face extreme abuse”, *Al Jazeera*, June 7, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/civilians-fleeing-fallujah-face-extreme-abuse-160607170116953.html>

The Syrian opposition would, then, need to persuade the world not only of the brutality of the Syrian regime, but that an alternative authority capable of running the country and upholding its territorial integrity and stability exists. Thus far, they have failed to demonstrate this.