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# THE BATTLE FOR ALEPPO AND THE FATE OF SYRIA

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The struggle for the Syrian city of Aleppo is of great strategic importance for all conflict stakeholders. The winner on the front line will significantly determine the course of negotiations regarding a ceasefire as well as the political future of Syria. The Aleppo offensive is, therefore, a matter of life and death for the armed opposition in their fight against the regime and its allies. Peace in Syria can ultimately only be achieved by pressure from outside. If the United States and Russia pull on one rope together, the chances are good that the regime will bend to Russian demands and open up to an inclusive process leading to political stabilization.

## **The Fate of the Opposition lies in Aleppo**

Aleppo, the second largest city of Syria, is the last urban stronghold of the armed opposition. The loss of Aleppo would mean a military and political victory of the Assad regime. Then, there would no longer be a de facto, rebel-controlled region of 'North Syria', but only a 'West Syria' controlled by Assad, where 70% of the total population are living. The rebel groups located in the contested province of Aleppo are benefitting from their geographical proximity with Turkey which supports the opposition and provides it with replenishments. Therefore, the regime and its allies, have been using all their capabilities to disrupt the most important supply routes of the armed groups. Accordingly, in August 2016 – with the help of the Kurdish militia, YPG – the encirclement of the eastern part of the city was made possible by seizing the 'Castello Road'. Only for a short period of time did a powerful opposition alliance – including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), the Syrian offshoot of al-Qaeda – manage to break through the siege.

## **The Collapse of Ceasefire Agreements**

The encirclement of approximately 275,000

civilians in Aleppo, and the consequential impending humanitarian disaster, allowed for a renewed convergence between the United States and Russia. The ceasefire agreement negotiated in September 2016 provided for a comprehensive ceasefire and humanitarian access to eastern Aleppo as well as for exchanging intelligence information for the purpose of jointly combating the terrorist-classified groups, namely: 'Islamic State' (IS) and 'al-Qaeda'. In return, by applying pressure on Assad, Russia would prevent air strikes on rebel-held areas. The seven-day ceasefire was marked by constant finger-pointing: in an accidental air strike by the US-led anti-IS coalition, 62 Syrian soldiers lost their lives. Russia accused the United States of deliberately attacking the Syrian army. In contrast, the United States held Russia responsible for the air strike on a UN aid convoy.

The collapse of the ceasefire agreements has been due, inter alia, to lack of exercising pressure on local conflict stakeholders to abide by those agreements. According to statements made by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, 20 of the 150 rebel groups violated the September ceasefire 300 times and did not retreat from the agreed-upon demilita-

alized connecting route, 'Castello Road'. On the other side, Russia has not been exercising consistent pressure on the regime to observe the ceasefires or political agreements. Assad, in turn, does not have full control over all regime-loyal militias, which pursue different agendas in Syria. The controversial September ceasefire agreement permits the fight against the al-Qaeda offshoot, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), which is the most battle-experienced and largest rebel group. The often-demanded separation of the opposition from the dominant JFS presents a dilemma for numerous rebel groups. On the one hand, the survival of these groups on the front line depends on JFS. On the other hand, a splitting off could be conducive to acts of revenge among themselves. Moreover, the attempt at pressuring the opposition to distance itself through the discontinuance of arms deliveries to them has made no progress. The September ceasefire illustrates the fragile basis of the agreement. Russia and the United States have been setting difficult conditions without being able to guarantee their implementation. In the long run, the largest beneficiary of the conclusion of ceasefire agreements is Assad, since, ultimately, the JFS would be isolated and the opposition automatically weakened. A collapse of the agreement would distance the opposition – which through the demand of separation from the JFS has already been subject to a tough test – even further away from its ally, the United States.

Against the background of international outcry that Russia committed war crimes in Aleppo and the UN resolution put forward by France on the suspension of military operations, Russia repeatedly approved day- and hour-based unilateral ceasefires to provide supplies to the civilian population. Yet, the ultimatums made by Russia – urging the civilian population and fighters to flee Aleppo – may indicate an imminent, total escalation in Aleppo. Furthermore, with the outgoing Obama administration's limited capacity to act, no reaction on the part of the United States can be expected.

## **Regional Powers and their Zones of Influence in Syria**

Certain spheres of influence of different conflict stakeholders can be delineated. For now, these appear to be endured by the Assad regime and international community as a reality and currency for later political concessions:

### Russian-Iranian condominium

The two powers, Iran and Russia, are complementing each other in their Syria strategy. The approximately 60,000 Shiite fighters under Iranian command are essential for the capturing of territories, especially since the regular Syrian Arab Army is drained after five years of fighting and is, also, facing recruitment problems. The powerful Russian air force plays an important role in supporting these ground forces. Tehran and Moscow have divided Syria in two de facto control zones. The South West of Syria is located in the Iranian sphere of interest, the North West as well as the oasis city of Palmyra in the Russian sphere of interest. If the current US policy under President Trump's administration does not change, Russia and Iran could establish a condominium, which may encompass, in future, the entire national Syrian territory. In such a scenario, Russia could decide on the existence of a Syrian Kurdistan, connecting the canton of Afrin with the rest of Rojava. This connecting possibility could serve as leverage against Turkey.

With the development of the port of Tartus into a Russian naval base, the Alawite coastal area would belong to Russia's favoured sphere of influence. Moreover, for demographic reasons, the Alawite minority needs the protection of Moscow against feared attacks by the majority Sunni society.

### Assad's 'useful Syria'

From the regime's perspective, the Russian intervention has led to a regained self-confidence. While the recovered territory in terms of surface area is small (approximately 2% of the lost territories since 2011), three core objectives have been achieved: the presence

of Russian military bases has allowed the protection of Latakia – the Alawite heartland – against rebel attacks; a line of safe communication between Damascus and Aleppo has been established; and, ultimately, a secure western Syria has been created, where Assad – regardless of developments on the front line – would secure survival as president (until 2021, according to his statements).

#### Iran's Sunni-free zone

The sphere of influence of Iran is consistent with Assad's strategy of ruling a 'useful Syria'. The Sunni opposition-occupied suburbs around Damascus, such as Darayya and Eastern Ghouta, have been "freed" by way of siege, starvation or conclusion of evacuation agreements, among other methods. While Assad's 'demographic displacement policy' helps the regime to maintain control over Damascus, the targeted and forced resettlement of Sunnis towards northern Syria and the resettlement of Alawites or Shiites in the freed areas would enable Iran to pursue its ambitions, namely: the creation and control of a Sunni-free corridor linking the Syrian coastal area with Hezbollah strongholds and the creation as well of a direct land connection extending from Iran through Iraq to southern Syria and Lebanon. Given its extensive financial, military and political engagements in Syria, Tehran would presumably gear all efforts towards preserving its long-term influence in this corridor. As a protection against the neighbouring, hostile-minded Sunni majority population, it would be necessary for Iran to establish a regional buffer zone of a sort.

#### A safe zone in southern Syria

Israel and Jordan have secured their spheres of influence in southern Syria. Jordan has ceased its support to the rebel south front and, in return, can free itself from the burden of Syrian refugees, by settling them in a secure zone in the border area without danger from Russian or regime air strikes. Israel wants to prevent military bases of Iran and Hezbollah at its borders, as well as to prevent the strengthening of Hezbollah through the con-

nection between southern Syria and southern Lebanon. Crossing this 'red line' would probably provoke a military intervention by Israel.

#### Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States

Saudi Arabia and a number of Gulf States, which are hostile to Assad, will not idly watch Iran score a victory. The capabilities in this regard range from equipping rebels with anti-aircraft missiles to opening a new front line in northern Lebanon, where a strong, local Salafist presence and thousands of desperate Syrian refugees could be mobilized. In this way, the Alawite heartland would again be threatened. The efficiency of Saudi Arabian assistance for the rebels is, however, strongly dependent on how Turkey behaves and on the ability to control the supply routes within rebel areas. Without external financial support and arms deliveries, only two options remain open to the opposition: either to accept a Russian-Iranian transition plan with Assad remaining in power, or to join effort with the better equipped jihadist militias, which want to continue the fight against the regime and its allies using asymmetric warfare. The fate of the opposition now depends, to a large degree, on Erdogan's plans and Putin's acquiescence thereof.

#### The Turkish intervention in Syria

The Turkish zone of influence encompasses the strip between Jarablus and Aleppo's suburbs. Rebels supported by Turkey marched for the first time into northern Syria, at the end of August, in order to cleanse the border area of the terrorist organisation IS and to prevent the PKK-allied YPG from creating a continuous, autonomous region of Syrian Kurdistan. Paradoxically, the goals of the intervention correspond with the political agendas of Russia, Iran and even the Assad regime, namely: to preserve the territorial entity of Syria as well as to fight IS. The units supported by Turkey – mostly Syrian Arabs and Turkmen – are fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army and have retaken the IS-occupied border area. The next step would be to create a 20-km-deep security zone, a de-

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mand already made by Turkey for years. Syrian Arab refugees, as well as the Turkmen minority population, are positioned in this area as a bulwark against Syrian-Kurdish ambitions, within the reach of the regime-besieged city of Aleppo. In the coming months, it will be revealed if Ankara would content itself with the control of its narrow zone of influence in north-western Syria or would embark on a more proactive role by breaking through the Russian-Iranian dominance in Syria.

### **Political Solution to the Conflict – Conclusions and Recommendations**

The expected capturing of the whole of Aleppo in December would complete Assad's strategy of controlling a rebel-free 'useful Syria'. Moreover, Russia is not interested in recapturing the entire Syrian national territory. The capturing of Aleppo could, therefore, open a new window for political negotiations:

- The solution to the war in Syria requires agreement between the United States and Russia concerning the modalities of a Syrian transition process as well as Assad's role in it. Yet, also the protagonists of the conflict – Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and a number of Gulf States – which significantly influence the balance of power in Syria are, too, urged to operate in a tempering manner.
- Russia and Iran should be aware that stability under Assad will not be achieved, since neither the regime is ready for serious negotiations with the opposition, nor is the opposition ready to accept Assad in a transition phase. Therefore, external pressure should be exerted in order for Assad to step down.
- Russia should attach conditions to its support for the Assad regime and be more committed to an inclusive, political stabilisation process. The giving in of the regime to Syria's disarmament of chemical weapons in 2013 proves that an exertion of influence by Russia on Assad is possible.

- The Syrian opposition groups ought to make compromises. The stepping down of Assad could be the only symbolic concession. As for the representatives of the regime, they would remain largely in place, since the removal of state structures, following the example of Iraq, would have negative consequences. A separation of the opposition from hardliners, such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, is necessary for a peaceful outcome.
- Alternative proposals for the transition process should be seriously taken into account – these range from a transfer of authority from Assad to a council of representatives, the transfer of power to individual Syrian generals or the establishment of a transitional council composed of representatives of the regime and opposition.
- Peace talks should be accompanied by concrete considerations for implementing the outcome of such talks. These include: a UN mandate, a monitoring process, material and personnel resources – especially for reconstruction – and most probably a robust peacekeeping force.

#### **Personal Data:**

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