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Syria

What Happened in Aleppo?

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The liberated neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo, under the control of neither the Assad regime nor the jihadist forces, fell in mid-December. Residents endured a continuous stream of air raids while pro-regime forces — hundreds of elite soldiers from the Republican Guard and the Syrian Fourth Division, with thousands of foreign fighters led by Iran and Hezbollah — advanced on the ground.

Eastern Aleppo has been under siege since July 2016, and the civilian population lacked food, water, medicine, and other necessities. Before the takeover, about fifty thousand people had fled, mostly to regime-controlled areas. Several thousand, however, went to the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood, which is under Kurdish control. Some sources report that the regime has ordered the Kurdish armed forces, the People's Protection Units (YPG), to leave their stronghold before the end of the year. [1]

Meanwhile, a few days after the official announcement of the takeover of Aleppo, on December 29, Russian military officials hosted a meeting in their air base at Hmeimim in western Syria with various representatives of Kurdish movements, including both the Democratic Society Movement (TeV-Dem) — implicitly representing the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) — and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), supported by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), to mediate future relations between them and the Assad regime.

The regime's authorities, which has so far refused to recognize "unlawful" PYD-led self-administered areas, submitted a list of conditions that would regulate relations between Damascus and the Kurdish enclave: Kurdish parties must back Assad in the upcoming elections, they abandon their demand for a federal system, and they hoist the Syrian flag on all government buildings and offices. [2] The day before the PYD Kurdish authorities had actually announced the dropping of the word Rojava — a Kurdish word for western Kurdistan — from the official name of the Federation of Northern Syria.

Assad's diplomatic maneuvering occurred in a bloody context. During the battle for Aleppo, pro-regime soldiers committed war crimes, while a new forced displacement of the population occurred. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that it had credible evidence that soldiers killed some eighty-two civilians either at home or on the streets during the conquest.

Pro-Iranian militias delayed the tenuous civilian evacuation, attacking the first convoys. Other pro-regime forces robbed fleeing residents. Fighters linked to the jihadist group Jund Al-Aqsa — allied with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham — burned the buses evacuating the wounded from two Shi'a inhabited cities, temporarily blocking civilian departures from eastern Aleppo. Many condemned this act on social networks.

Fleeing men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five were separated from the rest of the civilian population and interrogated by security services. Some feared incarceration or execution, but the majority were conscripted into Assad's army to fight against the opposition, some against their former comrades.

The opposition forces consist of between 7,000 and 10,000 combatants. Although many journalists [3] have focused on the number of jihadists in eastern Aleppo, only about 250 to 700 fighters [4] come from Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. [5] Local brigades were mostly a combination of armed groups acting under the network of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Ahrar al-Sham, a salafist force, and other Islamic groups, but were not jihadists. That does not mean that these groups did not commit crimes. Many Syrian leftists have condemned their bombing of civilians and civilian infrastructures in the regions under the control of the regime's forces, and of the Kurdish neighborhoods of Sheikh

Maqsood, among other abuses. The issue at hand, however, was to oppose a destructive and aggressive war against the civilians in Eastern Aleppo, and elsewhere, regardless of the reactionary nature of some parts of the opposition.

The groups in the city formed a unified command called “the army of Aleppo” to defend the districts under their control, but this didn’t prevent infighting or criminal activity. Further, some of the brigades that depend on Turkey for support actually left Aleppo in August to join the Turkish intervention against ISIS and the Kurdish PYD in northern Syria. Their absence contributed to the chaos of the siege’s final weeks.

Indeed, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan “despite his ostensible support for the rebels” remained silent on the events in Aleppo, and his prime minister stated that he did not object to Assad remaining in power during a transitional period. In fact, Erdoğan has agreed to a power-sharing scheme with Russian and Iranian leaders: Aleppo for them; Jarablus and other border regions for Turkey.

Turkey has long prioritized fighting Kurdish forces over deposing Assad. [6] On November 22, the country issued an arrest warrant for PYD leader Saleh Muslim, while brutally cracking down on representatives and members of the left-wing People’s Democratic Party (HDP) at home. On January 7, 2017, the Turkish army announced the death of 291 Kurdish fighters of the YPG during military operations in northern Syria since August 2016. [7] In addition to this, more than 280 civilians were killed by Turkish fire since the beginning of its military intervention in Syria, while Turkish border guards killed around 170 fleeing civilians in 2016.

Iran, Turkey, and Russia met on December 20 to discuss Syria’s future, adopting a joint declaration to end the conflict and work toward a nationwide ceasefire. The resolution calls on the armed forces to fight against terrorism, not for regime change. Following this first meeting, a nationwide ceasefire, sponsored by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, was implemented on December 29, although violated in some areas by the regime. There have been airstrikes against various opposition-held areas, while the main violations were in the northwest of Damascus in the Wadi Barada valley. Pro-regime forces and Hezbollah are trying to recapture this area, whose major spring provides most of Damascus’s water supplies and which lies on a major supply route from Lebanon to Damascus used by Hezbollah.

Some armed opposition forces, both from the FSA network and Islamic forces, declared on January 2 that they had decided to freeze any talks about their possible participation in Syrian peace negotiations being prepared by Moscow in Kazakhstan unless the Syrian regime and its Iran-backed allies end their violations of a ceasefire.

At the same time, massive popular demonstrations with democratic and non-sectarian slogans took place on the last two Fridays (December 21 and January 6 [8]) in the liberated territories, taking advantage of the partial cessation of hostilities, just like in February and March 2016.

What Eastern Aleppo Means

Despite their stated goal of defeating ISIS in Syria, Assad and his allies were really interested in stamping out a democratic challenge.

Let us return to Aleppo. Anti-regime forces liberated the eastern neighborhoods in the summer of 2012. Alongside civilian groups, they set up a transitional revolutionary council that was replaced the next spring with a democratically elected local council.

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The twenty-five-member council was renewed every year. [9] Representatives were not directly elected, but selected from lists by assembly members from the sixty-three area councils in the liberated regions. Representatives from professional trade unions, including lawyers, engineers, and teachers, also had a vote. The local council administered the territory, providing basic needs — education, infrastructure, hospitals, and so on — for residents, which they determined by meeting with neighborhood assemblies. [10] Six hundred people worked for the various councils.

Of course, the arrangement had its problems — women [11] and those from minority communities were underrepresented in the council's highest leadership. In other regions, council members were often also chosen rather than elected, based on the influence of local military leaders, clan and family structures, and elders. In some cases, as argued by researcher Sabr Darwish [12], the dynamics of the establishment of local councils were closer to representing family and tribal "quotas" rather than democratic dynamics.

Still, it was impossible to ignore the way that popular power flourished in even dire conditions. Residents also established popular organizations and put together democratic, social, educational, and cultural activities. Local radio stations and newspapers sprang up. Many campaigns opposing both the regime and Islamic fundamentalist forces emerged. All the while, activists and grassroots organizations strove to deliver an inclusive message against sectarianism and racism. These organizers challenged some armed groups' authoritarian practices and opposed Islamic fundamentalism.

ISIS gained a foothold in the city in 2013, but was kicked out in early 2014 thanks to massive popular mobilizations and armed opposition groups linked principally to the FSA. Jabhat al-Nusra next faced this democratic opposition to its reactionary and authoritarian practices.

Other liberated Syrian areas look a lot like eastern Aleppo. As a result, they have been the Assad regime's and its allies' primary targets. Aleppo suffered under a stream of fire since the summer of 2013; Russian air forces joined the assault in October 2015.

In summer 2013, 1.5 million people lived in Aleppo and had most of their basic needs met by their democratically elected council. By just three years later, only 250,000 remained, and they lacked almost everything.

All the cities with a popular democratic alternative to Assad have been targeted. In August 2016, pro-regime forces captured Darayya, in the province of Damascus. In each area, Assad and his allies focus on destroying infrastructure. Between March 2011 and June 2016, 382 medical facilities were attacked, killing more than 700 medical workers. Assad and Putin are responsible for 90 percent of these assaults. They have also bombed other civilian institutions, including humanitarian workers, as well as bakeries, schools, and factories.

Since 2011, the regime has most feared these democratic organizations, even with all their imperfections. Assad worries much less about the corrupt and exiled official opposition and the Islamic fundamentalist forces. After all, the regime's authoritarian and sectarian practices encouraged and fostered ISIS's, Jabhat al-Nusra's, and other similar organizations' development — better to have a Islamic fundamentalist foe than one that could capture widespread international solidarity and popular legitimacy at home.

ISIS's invasion of Palmyra on December 11 testifies to this. [13] The regime concentrated its forces on eastern Aleppo, evacuating Palmyra just before ISIS fighters arrived. When they took the largely unprotected city, they found reserves of heavy weapons. The regime has repeatedly stated that ISIS is not a priority, and the Russian air force has concentrated its strikes on areas with little ISIS presence.

With Friends Like These

Western powers have done little more than express their regrets for what's happening in Syria. On December 19, the UN Security Council unanimously voted to deploy observers to oversee the Aleppo evacuation and to ensure civilians' safety. [14] This minor intervention does not, however, change the United States's and Europe's general orientation. Far from advocating for a democratic process in Syria, they offer little more than rhetorical opposition to Assad and his clique, despite evidence of war crimes, while seeking a political transition in which the main structures of the Assad regime are maintained. In addition, the US-led coalition, which has been bombing ISIS's Syrian and Iraqi positions since August 2014, has killed almost two thousand civilians.

Global powers want to liquidate the Syrian revolution's democratic aspirations in the name of the "war on terror." Donald Trump's victory only strengthens this, as he has declared on several occasions that he wants to work with Putin on resolving the Syrian war.

Although Trump's international political positions remain volatile and uncertain, his appointment of Rex Tillerson as chairman and chief executive officer of ExxonMobil as secretary of state, confirmed the president-elect's attitude toward Syria. [15] Tillerson is known for his pro-Russian positions, and in 2013, he received the highest Russian distinction for a civilian, the Order of Friendship, from Putin himself.

In this context, it becomes obvious that the conquest of eastern Aleppo was central to the Assad regime's plan to present the Syrian war as a fait accompli when the new American president takes office. The Western states' and even certain left-wing forces' so-called realist policy toward Assad rests on the belief that they can get rid of ISIS and its sister organizations by empowering the very elements that fueled their development. That is, they will continue to support the dictatorial regimes that enacted neoliberal policies and allowed Western military intervention to proliferate throughout the region, both of which directly produced groups like ISIS.

Our Destinies Are Linked

Faced with the Assad regime's and its allies' endless crimes against the Syrian people, faced with the main international players' desire to liquidate the Syrian revolution's democratic aspirations [16], we must reaffirm our support for the progressive groups fighting for democracy, social justice, and equality against all forms of sectarianism.

It is crucial not to separate the struggle for Kurdish self-determination from these dynamics. [17] In 2012, the mobilizations across the Syrian population forced the Assad regime to withdraw from certain Kurdish-majority regions and to sign a non-confrontation agreement with PYD forces. The Syrian revolution's defeat will mark the return of Kurdish oppression under a chauvinist regime that has always opposed any recognition of the rights of Kurdish people.

Which leaves the obvious question: what kind of solution should leftists support? [18] In a complicated and dire situation, easy answers are hard to come by but there is little doubt about a few things. We must advocate an end to the war, which creates terrible suffering, blocks refugees and internally displaced persons from their homes, and benefits only the counterrevolutionary forces on both sides. We must also denounce all foreign interventions that oppose democratic change in Syria, whether it comes from pro-regime forces Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah or from those who proclaim themselves "friends of the Syrian people" Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. Again, the case of Syrian uprising has shown the blindness of those who believe they can conclude strategic agreements or trust imperialist states or regional powers to advance the struggle for popular emancipation.

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Likewise, we must reject all the attempts, which are now multiplying, to legitimize the Assad regime at the international level and to allow it to play any role in the country's future. A blank check given to Assad today will encourage future attempts by other authoritarian states to crush their populations if they came to revolt. This is why any political transition to put an end of the war and towards a democratic system must include the departure of Assad and his clique, otherwise the war will continue and provoke more catastrophes in terms of human lives.

We must therefore reaffirm our solidarity with the democratic and progressive forces that are struggling against both Assad's criminal regime and religious fundamentalist forces. There are still forces that aim to build a truly internationalist and progressive alternative in Syria, and our destinies are linked with theirs.

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[1] Rudaw ["Damascus gives YPG to end of year to vacate Aleppo"](#).

[2] RÃ»daw ["Kurds and Damascus meet over tensions, future of Rojava"](#).

[3] Reuters 12 December 2016 ["Factbox: Combatants fighting in Aleppo"](#).

[4] ??????? ?????? ["Quick notes on the doomsday of Aleppo"](#).

[5] *Huffington Post*, 18 July 2016 ["Under Pressure. Syria's Rebels Face al-Nusra Quandary"](#).

[6] elén Fernández, *Jacobin*, 9 September 2015, ["Turkey's War on the Kurds"](#).

[7] AraNews, 8 January 2017, ["Turkey's war on Syrian Kurds under scrutiny"](#).

[8] Suria Freedom Forever, 30 December 2016, ["Demonstrations Friday "The revolution brings us together"- 30-12-2016"](#).

[9] *Orient XXI* (in French), 2 December 2016, ["Comment s'organise la population d'Alep"](#).

[10] Carnegie Middle East Center, July 2015, ["The Assad Regime's Hold on the Syrian State"](#).

[11] Badael Foundation, 2015, ["â€"Peacebuilding defines our future now': A study of women's peace activism in Syria"](#).

[12] In Arabic, 13 September 2016 ["????????? ??????????: ????? ?? ?????"](#).

[13] *The Guardian*, 11 December 2016, ["Islamic State retakes historic city of Palmyra"](#).

[14] Al-Jazeera, 19 December 2016, ["UN Security Council backs sending observers to Aleppo"](#).

[15] NPR, 11 January 2017, ["5 Top Moments From Rex Tillerson's Hearing To Be Secretary Of State"](#).

[16] Asa Winstanley, *Jacobin*, 27 November 2013, ["Syria: The Revolution That Never Was"](#).

[17] Alex De Jong, *Jacobin*, 30 November 2016, ["The Rojava Project"](#).

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[18] Yusef Khalil and Yasser Munif, *Jacobin*, 9 January 2017, "[Syria and the Left](#)".