

## THE BATTLE FOR ALEPPO, KURDS AND THE SWITCHING ALLIANCES

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**Abstract:** The Battle of Aleppo is undoubtedly the most decisive battle in the exhausting war in Syria. Aleppo being the largest city in the country, adding here heterogeneous ethno-religious structure of the population, became the strategic node where the fate of the war and the survival of the Assad regime, was largely determined. It is estimated that about 30 different anti-government groups operated in the city. In the most complicated position was the Kurdish-inhabited district, protected by the Kurdish Protection Units (YPG). The multidimensionality of the war will force them to change alliances and attitudes towards other warring parties.

**Keywords:** YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel), Kurds, rebels, Syrian army, Alliances.

### **Introduction**

Aleppo is the most populous city in Syria. At least according to the last census of population in Syria, because the severity of the war, which took shape of human tragedy has changed once the demographics of the country. Aleppo will also be one of the hotbeds of popular mobilization against the Assad regime, and later during the war will become the epicenter of the confrontation. The various ethnic, sectarian and social divergences will emerge strongly on the remnants of hatred from the past and will further structure the confronting parties of the war that will take place within the city.

While the front lines will divide the city into broad lines between the Syrian army-controlled western part and the rebel-held eastern part, Kurds organized around the YPG will at all times defend the Sheikh Maqsoud district in the northern part of the city. Different connotations will impose conflicting alliances. The YPG will initially confront the Syrian army, but will later wage fierce battles with anti-Assad rebels. Beyond the simple territorial claim, the Kurdish district was important to the rebels also for the fact that through it there was an opportunity to access other territories under rebel control west of the city. Castello Road was vital to the rebels because of the possibility to bring the supplies. Initially the YPG will take control of this vital communication, followed by the Syrian army. Surrounded by

armed opposition, they will leave the city through the agreed corridor. The YPG's control over Sheikh Maqsood will continue.

### **Research methodology**

The study is subject to the application of analysis, comparative approach. The conclusions are based considering theoretical approach and dynamics of military-security issues on the ground.

### **Results**

Syria is for a long time an arena of fighting and continuous multidimensional crisis with multiply actors. The complex hostilities encountered in this war seriously tested the theories of civil war up to date. Civil wars are rarely a mere struggle between united front of rebels and existing dictatorial regimes. Again, rebel movements are divided into many factions that compete for leadership, territory, resources, and fighters. Theoretically, such civil wars can involve hundreds of rebel brigades that can create countless cooperative schemes, reconfiguring them through time. This means that rebels can make their choices with whom and when they want to cooperate in order to achieve their desired military goals, no matter if this is momentarily or strategically necessity.<sup>1</sup>

According to a theory produced by the observation of civil wars where several warring parties are involved, rebel groups have political preferences and moral visions for which they are fighting.<sup>2</sup> Indeed this complicated the Syrian War even more. The fact that many groups fought under the sponsorship of regional powers often with different attitude towards religious identity, or even acted as satellite armies on the ground, gives to this complication also an additional international dimension.

International ideology has been exposed to battles between ideological sectarianism and schools of thought, or what is sometimes called "theoretical sectarianism".<sup>3</sup> Sectarianism in Syria, however, goes beyond conventional political concepts. Not infrequently, the opening of new battlefields in different parts of the country, including Aleppo, has been done as a reflection of the escalating animosities either at the moment or within a longer period of time. The substratum of hatred has definitely existed before, but the desire for territorial control left no room for peace. Territorial gain can be realized only to the detriment of the one who has controlled the territory. The Kurdish-populated district north of Aleppo will not only become a limbo, but will be at the center of the functioning of alliances and switching of these alliances when needed. In a broader picture, Turkey's relationship with Kurdish military formations in generally has further aggravated the relationship between the YPG and rebel armed groups. The context of the events in Aleppo could not be overcome by this relationship. The graffiti in Sheikh Maqsood includes references to the PKK

and Ocalan. Martyrs' posters include not only those killed with the YPG, but also some who died fighting for the PKK.<sup>4</sup> Such an iconography was an argument more for Turkey to support various armed groups and urge them to act against the YPG.

In all this tangle of alliances, the warring parties fighting the Kurds in Syria tend to think that the Kurdish forces have more control than they deserve. Indeed, after the battle for Aleppo is left behind in history, the Syrian Democratic Forces, formed around the YPG, controls about 30% of the state territory, including the rich natural resources.

Aleppo itself is the biggest city in Syria, with an official population of 4.6 million in 2010. A city with such a demographic potential offered great labor power, thus creating Aleppo once to be Syria's industrial giant. Before the war, its industry employed 800,000 people<sup>5</sup>. City is characterized by ethnic and religious a diversity within the city. Heterogeneity, with groups forming a majority in the various city districts, created a territorial distinction within the city. From around 28,000 Armenians living in Syria, 18,000 of them are in Aleppo as it is estimated in 2017<sup>6</sup>.

Kurds are the largest ethnic and linguistic minority in the city, most of them recent immigrants from rural Kurdish areas north and northwest of Aleppo. Sheikh Maqsoud is the only Aleppo's district with an ethnic Kurdish majority. Some Aleppo Arabs has stereotypes toward Kurds often considering them poor and uneducated. Differences are seen especially when it comes to female gender. Kurdish women do not cover their faces, and do not wear a long black dress, typical for many Sunni Arab Muslim women in Aleppo<sup>7</sup>. But despite a common narrative about the Kurdish presence in Aleppo, it is in fact a historically established population in the city and its environs. The Kurds at a historical moment were the dominant military caste among Islamic societies. This role will return with the Ottoman conquest of the region in the 16th century<sup>8</sup>.

Interethnic and sectarian animosities in the city do not simply belong to the drives associated with the civil war. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, inter-ethnic relations between Arabs and Kurds deteriorated. In 2004, riots broke out in the city of Aleppo, in which Kurdish cleric Maashouq al-Haznawi, a critic of the Assad regime, was killed. Concerned about these events, the leader of the Autonomous Kurdistan Region, Massoud Barzani, will demand in 2005 that the Syrian government respect the rights of the Kurds<sup>9</sup>.

It must be acknowledged, however, that divisions and alignments in Aleppo, as in many parts of Syria, do not follow only identity lines. The upper class of Sunnis in Aleppo did not express much willingness to support the lower Sunni class which was mainly the nucleus of the population to rise up against the Assad longstanding regime<sup>10</sup>.

What have begun as the “Arab Spring” and as a mass popular mobilization of manly lower class against the government in Damascus, diverted to fierce civil war which would include Aleppo in the spotlight. Aleppo was the scene of most decisive fighting. If the outcomes after the battle are to be consider, for sure Aleppo may be called the mother of battles in Syria. The battle which began in 2012 lasted 5 years until the rebel-controlled parts of the city fell to Syrian Army on December 2016 [1]. The civilian casualties amount to about 31 thousand<sup>11</sup>. The city was largely destroyed, and part of the cultural heritage under UNESCO protection was damaged. Historian Nicholas Morton (2018) thinking of the fierce hostilities in Aleppo, took the example of the old battles over this area, and recalls that even then the Turks, Arabs, crusaders had more respect for each other, and even friendships were formed [2].

Syrian and Russian aviation allegedly aims to strike terrorism, were actually the airstrikes on rebel forces in northwestern Syria, these airstrikes were being decisive for the purge of rebels in Aleppo. Rebels lacked the support in continuity from the rebel-controlled territories north of Aleppo. The battle of between Aleppo reveals the complexity of the multidimensional war in Syria, but also in terms of the involvement of other regional actors. Russia’s involvement in Syria has created ISIS easily controllable territorial space, due to the fact that insurgents who once fought ISIS in addition to fighting Assad’s troops no longer have enough power to control territories, extensive as expected based on their organizational military capabilities they had prior to the losses they suffered from air strikes. Here also hides a secret and declaratively undeclared alliance between the regime in Damascus and ISIS in the term of considering it a secondary enemy.

Claiming that terrorism is being fought has been a wise excuse to ‘justify’ Russian military involvement in Syria. But, at the same time, the fact has been exploited that in the eyes of the UN but also in general within the international system, the government in Damascus remained all the time an internationally recognized and legitimate authority, and in the case of Russian involvement, they are also invoking the fact that they are invited by authorities universally recognized as legitimate.

Perhaps being treated as a legitimate government is also Assad’s biggest political victory to date.

Within the entire international system, of all the supranational organizations, the Arab League was the only one to deny Assad’s government from representing Syria within the organization. The Arab League has long recognized the political wing of the Free Syrian Army as the only legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Thus the ‘National Council’, had an opportunity to prove itself as a legitimate representative

of Syria. But the lack of political support from other factors, as well as the lack of support for the Free Syrian Army, has weakened the latter remained completely on the margins of the conflict in Syria.

With the weakening of the Free Syrian Army, space has been created for the formation of various armed groups in the ranks of the rebels, which on the one hand results in a total political and military lack of coordination. Fracture over the ideological motives has completely contradict the very concept with which the uprising against Assad started. On the other hand, the government in Damascus and its Russian ally have managed to lynch the image of the insurgents in terms of propaganda, while presenting the fight against them as a continuation of the fight against terrorism, thus by generalizing all anti-Assad structures.

The stigmatization of the rebels and their portrayal by many media as terrorist groups has largely created an environment that left the rebels in Syria alone in their fight against the Assad regime. On the other hand, airstrikes and helicopter attacks by Assad's forces and the Russian aviation, targeting not only military but also civilian targets. The insurgents in Aleppo, among others already stigmatized no longer had a motive to defend the strongholds in the city, as these attacks not only destroyed rebel infrastructure, but also hampered the further lives of civilians in rebel-held part of Aleppo. 'Barrel bombs' used by Syrian aviation are the subject of a resolution approved by the Council of UN Security Council.

The case of Aleppo, respectively the eastern part of the city, which for years and since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, was a bastion of resistance against Assad, further shows that in addition to the military dominance that has been made possible by Russian aid, regime in Damascus, there are no other means to extend legitimacy among the majority of the population in Syria. In Aleppo, not only were the remaining insurgent forces withdrawn under the agreement, but there were hundreds of thousands of civilians who also withdrew with them and were evacuated to areas that remain outside Assad's control. This is a clear indication that the insurgents had widespread support among the population or at least part of it, despite the shrinking of the territories under their control.

The ongoing civil war has caused extensive damage to Aleppo's infrastructure, as well as civilian and architectural buildings. There was a powerful explosion on March 4, 2015 in the old city that triggered several accelerometers in the area and felt like an earthquake<sup>12</sup>.

At the beginning of the battle, the Kurds of Aleppo formed armed groups and above all the Saladin Ayubi Brigade, which worked with the opposition. Than the YPG came in charge. The YPG bombed a security checkpoint of forces loyal to Assad in, killing and wounding a number of security forces. The YPG thus responded to an earlier airstrike by Syrian

forces on the Kurdish district of the city<sup>13</sup>. The Assad regime, meanwhile, used different positions against the YPG in Aleppo. Relations between the YPG and the armed anti-Assad opposition have been strained since the first phase of the war. After YPG took control over Afrin and Kobane, the FSA demanded that they be handed over to the FSA, a request which was rejected. In October 2012, violent clashes started out between FSA and YPG in Aleppo<sup>14</sup>. Since the capture of territories al-Nusra, YPG clashed also with various Islamist units as it sought to take over the control on Kurdish dominated north-east<sup>15</sup>. The US-backed militias attack on Kurdish formations in Aleppo for a moment created a strange paradox. It practically seemed as if American counterterrorism policy was against itself<sup>16</sup>. It was the rebels who were attacking the Kurdish district now. In March 2016, rebels launched rocket attacks on Sheikh Maqsood. The rockets contained phosphorus and chlorine<sup>17</sup>. In April 2016, artillery attacks coming from areas under rebel control killed more than 70 Kurds<sup>18</sup>. The bombings were part of pressure from al-Nusra Front to seize control of Sheikh Maqsood.

Many observers have seen how the Syrian Army has different approaches to the Kurds, depending on the battlefield in question. With several fronts within Syrian territory fighting the rebel groups, the Assad regime has avoided direct confrontation with YPG and forces concentrated in the strategic Damascus-Homs-Aleppo corridor<sup>19</sup>. As for Aleppo itself, the further confrontation of the Syrian army would not even have a logical military meaning. The Assad regime prioritized the epilogue to the positive of the battle for the city by concentrating on the most loyal troops. How important the city was for the survival of the regime is shown by the fact that in October 2015, about 2 thousand military troops supported by Iran will be brought<sup>20</sup>.

Government forces launched attacks at full capacity to force the rebels to retreat from the eastern part of the city [3]. Indeed, in 2016, unannounced or silent alliances were more precise as far as the city of Aleppo is concerned. From Sheikh Maqsood, the YPG fired on the rebels defending the Castello Road. The fall of this vital communication put the rebel-controlled areas of Aleppo under the siege<sup>21</sup>. Under complete siege, the rebels found it almost impossible to defend eastern Aleppo for long.

The defeat of the rebels in Aleppo is by far the biggest military victory of the Assad regime. For many reasons in military jargon, Aleppo has been called the ‘mother of battles’. Aleppo, which once had over 2 million inhabitants, was also the largest inhabited center in Syria. The insurgent forces have lost not only the largest military stronghold but also their main base of political support. Earlier, the rebels had lost the city where the uprising began. Despite the superiority in armaments that official Damascus and its Russian allies have, the latest course of fighting in Syria has shown

that these isolated strongholds are difficult to defeat militarily. In the case of Homs or Aleppo, the defeat of the rebels took place only after agreements which enabled them to evacuate with all their weapons. Thus at least a complete destruction of the human resources was avoided.

The war in Syria, as was previously witnessed by the war in Iraq, cannot end completely without certain political decisions. The case of the besieged cities which one by one fell into the hands of the regime in Damascus, excluded the possibility of equal treatment of the main territory of the rebels in northwestern Syria. Not only because of the fact that this territory was supported the Turkish border, but also because of the support of the population there, the insurgents there have a more stable military base, which does not allow Assad's victory in Aleppo to be considered even close to the victory of war as a whole.

### **Conclusions/Discussion**

By controlling an urban area without territorial continuity with other YPG-controlled territory, YPG will form alliances, first with the rebels, then with the Syrian army, with many interferences between. Aleppo was not the only case of conflicting alliances in Syria, but urban battlefield made the YPG's position in Aleppo very specific.

### **Conclusion**

The Battle of Aleppo brought in to light a series of new realities around which coalitions are formed in war. The stratification of the population into classes according to well-being and political position in the case of Aleppo was only an addition to the long-established ethnic and sectarian divisions. As many recent wars have shown, the decisive factor in defining alliances was both the current and the strategic goal. The YPG changed its allies several times, forming opposing alliances. These alliances had an impact on the course of the war because the territory in which the Kurdish district in the northern edge of Aleppo is located was strategic in the rebels' attempt to communicate with their units west of the city via Castello Road. The control of the YPG, now a formation within the SDF, is unique to Aleppo, in the sense that holding such an urban enclave has its own security specifics, but obviously also political impact.

After fierce confrontations between them, the YPG and the Syrian army were no longer attacked in Aleppo. Both sides benefited from this. The YPG was simply defending the Kurdish-populated district and had no capacity within Aleppo to take any further action. The Syrian army on the other hand was not endangered by the YPG which had no claims on the city. The priority of the Syrian army in Aleppo was to repel the rebels and bring the entire city under control.

Viewed from a broader military perspective, now that the battle for Aleppo is over, the YPG in Aleppo is effectively isolated to wait for its capacity to increase. This made the undeclared ceasefire between the YPG and the Syrian army in Aleppo very sustainable. Neither party endangers the security of each other. From a security point of view, the dissatisfaction may come as a result of the economic tightening of the Kurdish-controlled district.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> **Gade**, E. K., et al. "Networks of Cooperation: Rebel Alliances in Fragmented Civil Wars." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2019): 2071 – 2097, p. 2074.

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<sup>19</sup> **Stansfield**, G. and **Mohammed S.** *The Kurdish Question Revisited*. Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 296.

<sup>20</sup> **AFP**. *2,000 Iranians join regime in battle for Aleppo in Syria*. 17 10



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