

## Syria after Aleppo: A Conflict Reunited?

Thomas Pierret\*

ARTICLE

In the summer of 2012, the withdrawal of most regime forces from eastern Syria paved the way for a transformation of the war into a fragmented, multi-front conflict. In late 2012, a separate confrontation erupted between Arab rebels and the Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG, People's Protection Units), each of which subsequently battled the Islamic State (IS) from 2014 onwards. As long as the regime only retained isolated outposts in the east (in Deir ez-Zor, Hassake and Qamishli), it was unable to shape military dynamics in the region, and US-led intervention in support of anti-IS forces (the YPG and their multi-ethnic allies within the Syrian Democratic Forces, and rebel units fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army) carried little risk of direct confrontation with the regime and its allies. This fragmentation of the conflict might now be coming to an end: following their victory in Aleppo last December, loyalist forces have not only continued to strengthen their control over western Syria, but have also been able to devote additional resources to the eastern theatre. By doing so, they have increasingly come into contact with anti-IS forces, either through cooperation, as in the case of the YPG, or through confrontation, as in the case of Turkey and Jordan-backed rebels. Although the regime is now hoping for a checkmate that would put an end to the war on its term, the growing entanglement of formerly separated arenas of confrontation also increases the risk of international confrontation.

### Loyalist Consolidation in Western Syria

The fall of eastern Aleppo in December 2016 was the coronation of series of loyalist victories made possible, from October 2015 onwards, by Russian airpower and Shia foreign fighters recruited by the Iranian Pasdaran in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Pakistan. These victories were also facilitated by Moscow's ability to secure informal de-confliction agreements with Syria's neighbours: in the south, Jordan froze support for anti-regime operations by the Southern Front coalition; in the north, while keeping supply lines open to the rebels, Turkey diverted part of the latter's human resources to support its Euphrates Shield (ES) operation against IS and the PKK-affiliated YPG, an operation whose success needed some form of Russian agreement. With fewer fronts to fight on, and weaker rebels, loyalist forces were able to strike devastating blows on their enemies.

In January 2016, the rebels lost most of their positions in the mountains of Latakia (Salma, Rabia). Around Damascus, opposition-held territories shrunk dramatically in the spring as the

regime captured the southern half of Eastern Ghouta, exploiting deadly infighting between the area's main rebel factions, the Army of Islam and the Rahman Corps. In subsequent months, the regime negotiated the departure of rebel fighters and thousands of civilians from several towns west of the capital (Daraya, Ma'damiyya, Khan al-Shih, Kanakir, al-Zakiya) and north of it (Qudsiyya, al-Hamma and al-Tell). This trend continued after the fall of Aleppo, as the regime's infamous "green buses" transferred successive waves of rebels and civilians from the Lebanese border area (Barada valley, Madaya and Zabadani), and Homs' al-Wa'r neighbourhood, to the opposition-held province of Idlib. By early May 2017, a similar agreement was under discussion concerning the Damascene neighbourhoods of Qabun and Berze, following a failed rebel offensive in the area and a new round of infighting among the rebels of Eastern Ghouta. As the opposition's territorial control was facing a looming threat of extinction in Damascus and central Syria, signs that the insurgency might morph and go underground had already emerged with the suicide attacks that targeted regime-held districts of Homs and Damascus in February-March 2017.

For loyalist forces, the main remaining stumbling block in western Syria is the rebel-held area centred on Idlib, which extends, north, to the western suburbs of Aleppo and, south, to the northern countryside of Hama. This north-western opposition stronghold is dominated by the Turkey-backed Salafis of Ahrar al-Sham and by the Jihadists of Hay'a Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front. In March-April 2017, HTS led a southward rebel offensive that came within 3 km of Hama city. Although all rebel gains were reversed by loyalist forces, the offensive was enough of a shock to convince the regime to retaliate against the rebels' hinterland by carrying out a chemical attack on Khan Sheykhun on 4 April.

Although the Assad clan had probably calculated that the Trump administration would not react to the chemical attack given its earlier promise to focus exclusively on the struggle against IS, the retaliatory US missile strike on the Shu'ayrat air base cost the regime dearly, if not militarily, at least in diplomatic terms. Even before the fall of Aleppo, the regime had started lobbying Western countries, in particular European ones, by highlighting the fact that its increasingly strong military position made it the only credible partner, hence recipient of foreign funding, for the stabilisation and reconstruction of the country. Based on implicit blackmail over further waves of refugees if the regime was not given the economic means to retain its population, this lobbying campaign was met with some success among Western analysts and decision-makers, but it suffered a severe (albeit probably temporary) blow when US cruise missiles reasserted Assad's status of international pariah.

### **The North-Eastern Front: Entrapping Turkey**

Following the Russian intervention, regime forces started to slowly move eastwards from Aleppo into IS-held territories. The first major push towards Raqqa was met with a disastrous setback in June 2016, but the capture of eastern Aleppo in December, and ensuing proclamation of a nationwide cessation of hostilities, allowed loyalist troops to resume operations in the area and, after four years of absence, to reach the Euphrates river by March 2017. The move was primarily aimed at stopping the advance of the Turkish forces of the ES

operation and their Syrian rebel auxiliaries which, after the capture of al-Bab, announced their intention to push south to take part in the liberation of Raqqa from IS. Turkey argued that in spite of their multi-ethnic character, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces were unfit to retake Arab-majority Raqqa due to their submission to YPG leadership. Now trapped in their northern pocket, ES forces tried to force their way to Raqqa through the YPG-held city of Manbij, yet they were rapidly forced to cease their advance due to the deployment of regime, Russian and US troops in the area. Regime-YPG cooperation entailed benefits for both partners: the regime could reopen a land connection between Damascus and the north-eastern Jezireh, and the YPG did the same between its western and eastern possessions.

While Russia has exploited Turkish military pressure to foster collaboration between the regime and the YPG, it has at the same time used the threat of increased support for the Kurdish militia to shape Ankara's policies in its favour. By sending troops to the western YPG stronghold of Afrin, Moscow deterred Turks from entering the area, while emboldening YPG leaders, who declared that they might move south to the province of Idlib, seize the border area from the rebels, and link up with the regime-held Latakia province. Securing Russia's restraint in its support for the PYD was the main rationale for Turkish participation in the Astana process, which started after the fall of Aleppo and led to the proclamation of four "safe zones" in May 2017. As part of this process, Turkey paid lip-service to the idea of joining Russian and US efforts against HTS, which in turn led to a significant increase in armed incidents between rebel groups: HTS branded Turkish-backed factions as part of the "Astana conspiracy", hence as legitimate targets in its attempt at seizing strategic positions across the north-west and ensure its long-term survival in a hostile international context.

### **The Race to Deir ez-Zor**

Loyalist campaigns in the central desert (Badiya) are the best illustration of the regime's instrumental approach to nationwide ceasefire agreements, whose purpose is not to pave the way for a diplomatic process but to provide for the reallocation of manpower to the east. The first cessation of hostilities proclaimed in February 2016 allowed loyalist forces to retake Palmyra from IS, one year after the city fell to the latter. Palmyra was lost to IS once again in December 2016 as loyalist forces were concentrated in Aleppo, but a new cessation of hostilities at the end of that month paved the way for a new successful counter-attack, following which regime forces expanded their control in the central desert. The Russian-Iranian-Turkish agreement on de-escalation zones announced in May 2017 was once again used by the regime to prepare for a large-scale offensive aimed, this time, at re-opening the road from Palmyra to the besieged garrison of Deir Ez-Zor and, from there, to reassert regime control over the southern part of the Euphrates valley.

Besides the regime's ambition to retake the oil resources of the Syrian-Iraqi border area, the desert campaign also aimed to foil a parallel offensive carried out against IS by Jordan-backed rebel units operating alongside members of the US special forces. In late 2015, the Pentagon started to train and equip a "New Syrian Army" (NSA) made up of rebels previously expelled from the province of Deir ez-Zor by IS. The following March, the NSA took the region al-Tanaf, at the intersection of the Syrian, Jordanian and Iraqi borders and, in June, it carried out a bold

but disastrous attack behind IS lines on the military base of al-Hamdan near Albu Kamal. As IS weakened in the spring of 2017, however, the NSA (refashioned as Jaysh Maghawir al-Thawra) and other US and Jordanian-backed units that had long been operating in the south-eastern part of the central desert (Jaysh Usud al-Sharqiyya, the Martyr Ahmad al-'Abdo Forces) seized large parts of the southern desert, reaching the province of Deir ez-Zor in May. Accusing the US, the UK and Jordan of preparing a large-scale ground operation in the area, the Syrian regime tried to slow the advance of US-backed units by attacking them on the ground and bombing one of their bases along the Jordanian border.

### **Conclusion**

The withdrawal of Assad's troops from eastern Syria in 2012 paved the way for the fragmentation of the conflict with the emergence of new fronts that were unrelated to the master cleavage of the civil war; that is, the struggle between the regime and the opposition. Conversely, the string of victories won by loyalist forces in western Syria throughout 2016 allowed the regime and its allies to redirect their attention eastward, hence to cooperate with, or confront, local forces that had been fighting IS in relative isolation from the civil war's western theatre. Loyalist expansion to the east not only reconnected previously separate battlefields but also increased the risk of direct confrontation between the regime and its allies, on the one hand, and Turkey, the US and Jordan, on the other, despite the fact that since the Russian intervention of 2015 the latter countries had gradually distanced themselves from the conflict's master cleavage. Since 2014, IS de facto has played a buffer role between competing actors in Syria, and its weakening paradoxically makes the conflict more volatile than ever.