

ALEPPO MASSACRE: ASSAD IS ONLY GETTING STARTED

Analysis : Zvi Bar'el Dec 14, 2016 - Haaretz

The tragic results now being seen in Aleppo are the product of a policy that seems rational and of international priorities whose validity is hard to challenge.

Analysis Aleppo massacre: U.S. and world failed Syrians, giving Assad his greatest military achievement

Testimonies from Aleppo: 'Waiting for death,' Syrians voice final pleas to 'save our children'

Tens of thousands of residents of eastern Aleppo are now in mortal danger. This is not just because of the shortage of food and medicine and the destruction of all the city's hospitals. It is also because of the murderous "settling of scores" of the past two days, as the soldiers of Syrian President Bashar Assad and the militias helping him have carried out the systematic slaughter of everyone even suspected of cooperating with the rebels.

There's even an opposition website through which any resident of Aleppo can check if he or his children are wanted by the authorities, whether to be arrested or to be drafted into the military.

Civilians and insurgents trapped in a tiny, heavily bombarded enclave in the city issued heartbreaking, last ditch calls for help as they prepared to face a dire fate as the Syrian army closed in on the city the UN has described as a "complete meltdown of humanity." "Aleppo is being destroyed and burned completely," the Guardian quoted a doctor trapped in the area, Mohammad Abu Rajab, as saying in a voice message.

The Syrian army doesn't plan on stopping, either; there are a lot of other rebel-controlled regions in the country that will now be targeted for "cleansing" after the important strategic victory in Aleppo. This ravaged city is just the beginning of Assad's campaign of conquest. There's no doubting now that Russia, which intelligence officials first thought could not produce the turnabout that Assad had hoped for, has succeeded in not just rehabilitating the Syrian army, but in undercutting Iran to become the power in exclusive control of the Syrian theater.

The claim that the international community, led by the United States, failed to save Aleppo's residents or prevent its occupation must be examined against events that occurred before its conquest, primarily between 2013 and 2015. Actually, it was already in 2012 that it looked like the rebels had the upper hand in Aleppo. The rebels, primarily the Free Syrian Army, seized control of the eastern parts of the city, while Assad's forces were telling headquarters that at best they would be able to preserve their strongholds in various other sections. Nearby Idlib attracted attention when the Syrian army was defeated there, too.

The assessment then was that Aleppo had nothing to worry about – until the Syrian army blockaded the city in 2014. Even then, the diplomatic effort by UN envoy Staffan de Mistura to achieve a cease-fire was a matter of dispute. Some European countries felt that the threat posed by the blockade was exaggerated, while the Free Syrian Army rejected a cease-fire, which it believed would halt its successful attacks in southern Syria.

But this controversy was secondary to the main international event that stopped the great powers' intervention in Syria in general and in Aleppo in particular: Between 2013 and 2015 the negotiations on a nuclear agreement with Iran took place. Although both Iran and the six powers that conducted the talks declared that there was no connection between the nuclear agreement and the Syrian civil war, it was clear to all that any intervention in Syria was liable to undermine the efforts to reach a deal.

U.S. President Barack Obama and European leaders made a strategic decision to avoid military intervention in Syria and instead provide air support to the rebels to help them defeat Assad. In the background was the threat that if the Americans brought in troops, then Russia and maybe Iran would intervene. This wasn't merely an intelligence assessment; Iranian leaders and Russian President Vladimir Putin warned outright against such intervention. Under these circumstances, and as the world was focused on the Iran talks, there was no way to recruit anyone to intervene militarily, even though the number of people killed in Syria at that time had reached nearly 200,000.

Paradoxically, the nuclear agreement with Iran, which was signed on July 14, 2015, removed the Iranian nuclear threat but reduced the international pressure on Assad for more than two years. Two months after the deal was signed, Russia began its aerial intervention, presenting the West with a *fait accompli*.

Could the West have intervened after the Iranian nuclear deal? Theoretically the threat to that agreement was past, but Russia was already making its presence felt in the arena, and later the United States pulled out of the effort to overthrow Assad and instead focused on battling ISIS. While the rebel forces were entrenching themselves in Aleppo and other cities, ISIS had taken control of northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq. Its occupation of Iraq's northwestern sectors made ISIS the focus of attention but it still wasn't the main target of Western attacks, which began only in September 2014 and intensified in 2015 after terror attacks in Europe.

The fight against ISIS also created a confluence of interests between the West and Iran, which operated its own militias in Iraq and Syria in the war against the jihadist organization. Under these circumstances, in which Iran became a kind of partner to the West in fighting ISIS, and as the West defined the organization as the worst possible terror threat, there slowly developed a belief that Assad could be an effective partner in this battle if he could stabilize his regime. Indeed, this year the rebel militias, including the Free Syrian Army, reported that they'd received instructions not to act against Assad but to focus on fighting ISIS.

One can argue that the international community should have operated on both fronts, against ISIS and to help the rebels and save the residents of Aleppo. But one cannot ignore the fact that such action could have led to a direct confrontation between the United States and Russia, thus undermining the war against ISIS. The tragic results now being seen in Aleppo are therefore the product of a policy that seems rational and of international priorities whose validity is hard to challenge.

The main accusation against the international community is that they hesitated in halting the slaughter during the critical first years of the Syrian civil war. The

anger over this week's massacre in Aleppo is real, but one wonders where the shock was when 300,000 other Syrians were being killed.

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