

Why Aleppo's Gruesome Fall Puts Syria's Fate in Moscow's Hands

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

December 15, 2016



Hassan Ammar / AP

The fall of Eastern Aleppo to regime control yesterday and the fall of Palmyra to ISIS on December 11 has strategic consequences for Russia's operations in Syria.

Moscow faces a choice. Either it indulges the ambitions of Syria's president Bashar Assad and his allies in Tehran to continue with its military campaign aimed at wiping out the Syrian opposition. Or it decides to use the fall of Aleppo in order to broker a deal between the regime and the rebels, allowing Moscow to cash in politically while minimizing risks of mission creep.

The cloud of uncertainty over the future of Washington's Syria policy under the incoming Trump administration complicates Moscow's calculus, and will drive it to secure as many bargaining chips on the ground before negotiations.

The fall of Aleppo is a devastating blow to the Syrian uprising against Assad's rule, but it does not end the war. It fundamentally changes the nature of the armed conflict from a largely urban mass rebellion to a persistent rural insurgency. The Syrian regime and its Iranian allies reestablished their control over the so called "useful Syria," stretching to the West along the Mediterranean coast and the border with Lebanon. The regime will control the country's largest cities, and almost 60% of the population.

In other words, unless a great power intervenes militarily, Assad's regime can no longer be dislodged from power. The opposition still controls the entire Idlib province and significant rural areas in the Southern and Eastern Aleppo province with small pockets of resistance in Hama and around Damascus. But the rebellion can no longer threaten the regime's survival.

Read more: [Aleppo's Last Stand](#)

The big strategic decision for Russia is whether to succumb to pressure by Damascus and Tehran to completely defeat the moderate opposition in its remaining safe havens, or to pressure the regime into accepting some form of a political transition deal. Assad and Iran are likely to push for a major offensive in Idlib, where the moderate opposition is intertwined with Islamist fighters from Ahrar ash-Sham and an-Nusra terrorists. The battle for Idlib is likely to be long and bloody, requiring a much more aggressive application of Russian airpower and even Russian ground forces. This could last throughout the whole of 2017 and cloud the Russian presidential election in early 2018.

The Kremlin might be better off declaring victory in Aleppo, scaling down its military operations against the rebels, refocusing its air war on ISIS in a new collaborative effort with the US and pressuring the Assad regime into a political settlement. The humiliating loss of Palmyra to ISIS should ring a cautionary bell in Moscow. It underscores the weaknesses in the Syrian Arab Army which is still unable to hold the terrain under its control while conducting offensive operations on other fronts. The loss of Palmyra, its oil and gas fields and a continued ISIS offensive in the Homs province may create a major threat to the cohesiveness of the areas under regime control. It could even open up avenues for an ISIS offensive on Damascus (ironically, it was the Syrian opposition, not Assad's army, that blocked an ISIS advance towards Damascus in the summer of 2015).

Read more: [Why the Fall of Aleppo Won't End Syrian War, Only Change It](#)

The fall of Palmyra has also debunked the Syrian regime's false narrative that Assad and his allies are fighting ISIS and therefore should be treated as the West's natural allies in the war on terror. Russia has only just resumed bombing ISIS Palmyra after an almost three months' pause.

The utmost brutality with which Assad's regime treated civilians in Aleppo while trying to defeat the rebels has also turned into a major international problem for Moscow, which does not relish the prospect of sharing the responsibility for Assad's war crimes against his people. In this sense, an offensive in Idlib would dwarf the massacre in Aleppo.

Lastly, if Russia is serious about leveraging its military gains into a viable political settlement in Syria, it will have to work with Turkey. Ankara, unlike the United States, is able to separate moderates from terrorists and enforce an implementation of the cessation of hostilities, in

which Moscow can restrain the Syrian regime. There are now signs, with the latest ceasefire and evacuation agreement in Aleppo, that Russia and Turkey are working together to end the war and secure their respective interests, while limiting the ambitions of Damascus and Tehran.

Syria's future is likely to be decided by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Donald Trump's America will limit itself to defeating ISIS. And it may, actually, work.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/12/15/why-aleppos-gruesome-fall-puts-syrias-fate-in-moscows-hands-a56551>