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## The assault on Aleppo

Leila Al Shami

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*The questions for this interview were written by the authors of Syria: The Stolen Revolution.*

**We are currently witnessing what looks like the crushing of anti-Assad rebellion forces. The Aleppo battle seems to be a turning point in Syria's civil war before a general confrontation with ISIS occurs. In your opinion do rebel forces still shelter components of the revolutionary Syrian movement? Or are they nowadays reduced to sunni confessional militias, supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia?**

Anti Assad rebels in north Aleppo are now facing a relentless assault by Russians from the air and an Iranian backed ground force comprised of various sectarian militias. This has transformed their struggle against a fascist regime into a national liberation struggle. The Russian Air Force has decimated civilian infrastructure in the province. The main rebel supply route from Turkey has been severed. The rebels are surrounded in the Azaz corridor by regime allied militias, Daesh and the Kurdish YPG.

If Aleppo is besieged up to 300,000 people will be cut off from the outside world. Tens of thousands have fled the city. As

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well as crushing the armed resistance the Assad regime and its imperial backers are carrying out a deliberate and systematic policy to depopulate the liberated areas of Syria.

When we talk of 'liberated areas' it's more than just rhetoric. Under threat in Aleppo are the different local councils which ensure the governance of each area and have kept providing services to the local population in the absence of the state. We are talking about more than 100 civil society organizations (the second largest concentration of active civil society groups anywhere in the country). These include some 28 free media groups, women's organizations and emergency and relief organizations such as the Civil Defense Force. It also includes educational organizations such as Kesh Malek which provides non-ideological education for children, often in people's basements, to ensure school continues under bombardment. Under Assad's totalitarian state, independent civil society was non-existent and no independent media sources existed. But in Free Aleppo democracy is being practiced as the people themselves self-organize and run their communities. This for me represents the original goals of the revolutionary movement.

The armed militias in the north Aleppo area include both the Free Army and Islamists. The Islamists represent the conservative culture of rural Aleppo. They are comprised primarily of Aleppo's sons, brothers and fathers. They have strong local support and men and women have taken the streets in recent days calling for rebel unity to defend Free Aleppo from this fascist onslaught.

The rebels receive tepid support from the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Nothing until now has made a real difference on the ground such as providing the rebels with the anti-aircraft weapons they desperately need. This is changing with Turkey's military intervention. But Turkey's intervention is primarily designed to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state along its border. It has not intervened solely to protect

Syrian Democratic Forces. It appears the US has abandoned the rebels, even though it never truly supported them beyond applying pressure to force Assad to the negotiation table – a strategy which failed. The results of this will only be the strengthening of Daesh and other extremist groups like the Al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat Al Nusra. The US has not been responsive to Turkish concerns and proposals in Syria (such as arming the Free Army and establishing a safe zone) it has been more accommodating to Iran than its traditional allies – Turkey and Saudi. Alliances are currently interwoven among opposing interests and in flux.

liance which emerged during the revolution; the failure of Arab opposition leaders to stand fully behind the Kurdish struggle for self-determination; and the actions of the PYD and extremist Islamist militias. All Syrians will loose in such a scenario.

**Do you consider the Rojava cantons a safe place for Syrian political and revolutionary opponents to shelter? Or is exile still the only way to escape dictatorship?**

Because of the current practices of the PYD the Rojava cantons aren't a safe place for political and revolutionary groups operating independently of the PYD.

Afrin has welcomed some families fleeing Aleppo. But it's unlikely the cantons will allow large numbers of Arabs to seek safety on their territory incase they upset the demographic balance. The countries surrounding Syria have closed their borders except in exceptional cases. Many people simply do not have the option of leaving and do not have any place to go.

**Do you think the US and Russia agree on focusing the war on ISIS and that occidental powers are abandoning the opposition forces to Bashar and finally isolating Erdogan?**

In terms of the regime the Russian and US positions were never very different – no one wanted to see it dismantled. It was about Assadism with Assad (Russian position) or Assadism without Assad (the US position). What's changed is that now neither are calling for Assad to go.

In terms of fighting Daesh – rhetorically they both agree that this is their main focus. But as we have seen, very few of the airstrikes carried out by Russia have been on Daesh, but rather on the resistance militias fighting the regime and Daesh too. It must not be forgotten that the Free Army which is now being decimated and the (former) Islamic Front have been the most effective force on the ground at fighting Daesh – pushing them out of large parts of northern and eastern Syria in 2014 – before Daesh came back in force with the heavy weaponry it seized in Iraq and US support was given to the

the Azaz corridor, but is shelling civilians and uprooting olive trees in Afrin. No state is intervening to defend the popular struggle but rather to defend its own interests and those of its elites.

**What is the current situation in the eastern Ghouta and in the rebel controlled zones in the south?**

The eastern Ghouta is also under relentless attack. Assad and Russian forces have targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and market places. Over 160,000 people are trapped under regime siege in desperate conditions. Some authoritarian rebel groups have also been accused of stealing and hoarding food, contributing further to the people's suffering. But despite these challenges the people of the Eastern Ghouta have practiced communal solidarity in the most creative and practical ways and kept life functioning. They've dug wells for water supply, set up solar power and recycled methane from waste to provide an alternative energy supply. They've operated makeshift hospitals and schools and grown food (often roof-top gardens) to fend off starvation. Since the beginning of this year two towns in the eastern Ghouta, Erbin and Zamalka, have held democratic elections for their local council.

The rebels in the south are under a lot of pressure at the moment and the regime, under cover of Russian airstrikes, has made strategic gains around Deraa. Most hospitals and clinics in east Deraa are now out of service due to bombardment. The Deraa provincial council reports that more than 80,000 people have fled their homes to seek refugee deeper in rebel-held territory or have moved towards the Jordanian border which is closed. The south of the country is held mainly by the Southern Front, a coalition of over 50 Free Army groups with a secular, democratic agenda which have largely refused to cooperate with extremist Islamist groups. The Southern Front receives support via Jordan which has been reducing assistance to the group in recent weeks, under US pressure, to get rebels to focus

their fight on Daesh (even though there's little Daesh presence in the south) rather than the regime.

**How would you interpret YPG/PYD strategy? Do you think there will be a final armed confrontation between the Kurds and the Baathist regime, or do you think Russians, Iranians, Kurds and Baathists have a shared vision of the future of Syria? In other words, is there a general agreement on land and power sharing within the former borders?**

In the case of the Kurds, key regime figures have said they will not accept Kurdish autonomy in the north. Concessions given to the PYD by the regime so far should be seen as tactical. But it now looks as if the PYD has turned to Russia as its protector. And for Russia an alliance with the PYD is a useful tool in its fight against Turkey. The PYD has at times entered into strategic alliances with the regime, but the YPG has also fought the regime. It's alliances are solely pragmatic in maintaining control over the north. If Arab resistance forces are neutralized, it's possible that Assad will turn his attention to destroying Kurdish autonomy. Whether Russia and the US (allied with the YPG) allow this to happen remains to be seen.

The Russians, Iranians and the regime realize that Assad will be unable to reassert his control over large parts of the country which he has already lost. It's possible there will be a partition of Syria and the imposition of mini states along sectarian lines. In areas which the regime and its allies hope to control, we are witnessing the ethnic cleansing of Sunni (oppositional) communities and their repopulation with communities loyal to the regime and its allies. When the regime took over Homs, the land registry was destroyed and Alawites moved into vacant Sunni homes. The assault on Zabadani and crippling siege on Madaya by the regime and Hizbullah are designed to force Sunni inhabitants to leave the area. It's feared that Lebanese and Iraqi Shia militia members and their families will be resettled there. Iran and Hizbullah's involvement is to

maintain the strategic link from Iran to Lebanon which runs through Damascus (and Baghdad) and is fueled by sectarianism. As for Russia, deals have already been made to hand over Syria's energy sector to Russian companies. Both Iran and Russia see Syria as a key battle ground in their geo-political struggles with Saudi Arabia and the West respectively.

**Do you perceive the unification of Rojava's canton (Afrin, Kobane, Jazira), its political and social system, and the creation of Syrian Democratic Forces (multi-ethnic and multi-confessional – YPG ruled) as a democratic alternative to the regime Reconquista?**

It's not a 'democratic' alternative but it's an alternative. The Self-Administration is monopolized by the PYD. Those Kurds that oppose the PYD have been silenced, imprisoned, tortured and assassinated. The PYD has now moved beyond the idea of democratic confederalism (democracy without the state) – an idea which I strongly support – towards attempts to carve out a new state through linking the cantons. This includes its expansionist turn to take over Arab majority areas under cover of Russian airstrikes. The Syrian Democratic Forces aren't an alternative to the regime. Dominated by the YPG and including some minor Arab forces, they were established to gain the support of the US led coalition in the fight against Daesh only.

Kurds have suffered decades of systematic oppression at the hands of Arabist (and Turkish nationalist) regimes and their struggle for self-determination should be supported. Inspiring examples of self-organization and direct democracy have occurred on the community level through the communes established in towns and villages across Rojava. Kurdish youth are filled with libertarian spirit and all Syrians can learn from the ideas which are spreading across the north. My main fears are that this will be undone in the end by PYD authoritarianism and that Arab-Kurdish ethnic conflict will break out. If ethnic conflict breaks out it will be a result of three factors: the attempt of the Syrian regime to destroy any Arab-Kurdish al-