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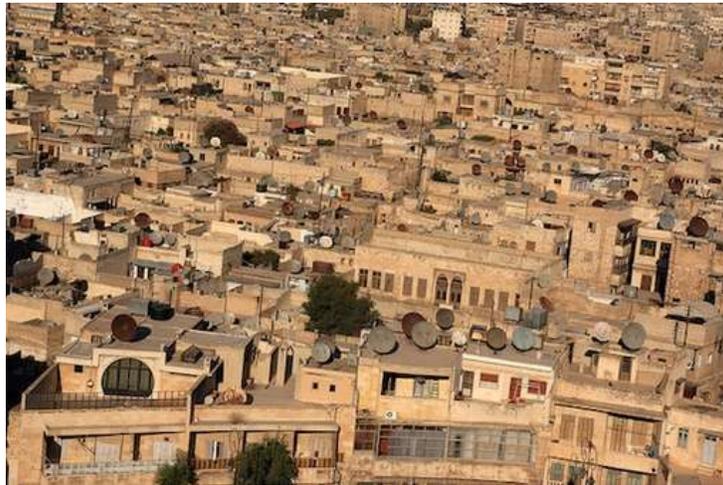
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After Aleppo: the State of Syria

By Vijay Prashad
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The Syrian Arab Army now controls Aleppo, which means that the Syrian government once more is in charge of the main population centres in the country. Opposition armed forces are hemmed in around Damascus and in Idlib, while the Islamic State (IS) still holds the northern city of Raqqa. These forces, including IS, are on the back foot, disorganised, weakened logistically and disoriented. Largely abandoned by their benefactors — the West, the Gulf Arabs and Turkey — these fighters have either moved to great desperation in their violence or to near surrender. A ceasefire brokered on December 30, 2016 holds in most parts of the country. Peace

talks are to begin on January 23 in Astana (Kazakhstan). Iran, Russia, the Syrian government, sections of the Syrian opposition, Turkey and the United Nations will have seats at the table. The United States and the Europeans will not be there.

The war will not end in Astana. Extremist groups such as the IS and the al-Qaeda-backed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham continue to hold territory. Frustrated extremists who are unwilling to accede to the new situation have already begun to trek to the IS and the al-Qaeda proxy. For them, there is little to be gained from surrender or reconciliation.

Western miscalculations

For the past five years, the main slogan from the Syrian opposition and its Gulf Arab, Turkish and Western allies was ‘Assad Must Go’. It now turns out that the government of Bashar al-Assad will remain. It appeared, even in 2011, that the fall of Mr. Assad without major Western military intervention was unlikely. The Syrian military was far more disciplined than the Libyan military, which had begun to crumble before the NATO bombing on Libya. There was also far less daylight between the Syrian government and its military than there was between the Egyptian government and its military. Absent massive military force, there was going to be no regime change in Syria.

Direct Western military intervention was curtailed — thanks to the fiasco in Iraq — by the lack of domestic appetite in the West for the use of sufficient numbers of troops to fight in Syria. Regime change in Libya and its disastrous aftermath closed the door for a UN authorisation for war on Syria. By 2012, this meant that the Assad government could not be easily defeated. The policy shifted from direct overthrow to a much more cynical use of power. Covert shipments of arms went to rebels of various stripes to help delegitimise the government. Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups came across the Turkish border and from Iraq as well as from the prisons of the Syrian government. Casualty rates edged upwards, with over half a million dead. The impossible promise of Western bombardment kept the war going in the hope that this would force Mr. Assad to negotiate.

The West miscalculated. On September 22, 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry made some off-the-cuff remarks at the Dutch Mission to the United Nations. The tape from that meeting, released by WikiLeaks, reveals the general Western consensus on the Syrian conflict. Mr. Kerry indicated that the U.S. had watched the growth of IS, and had hoped to use it as a bargaining chip against the Assad government. As it turned out, Mr. Assad turned to Iran and Russia for help, which is when the Russians intervened directly in September 2015 — ending any possibility of regime change in Damascus and of an IS capture of Damascus. With Mr. Assad now safe, the Russians have begun to draw down their forces, largely to build confidence towards the Astana meeting.

By 2015, it had become clear to the Turkish government that neither would Mr. Assad’s government fall nor could Turkey protect itself from the detritus of its own making — attacks by the IS inside Turkey and a reopened war with the Kurdish resistance movement. Turkey’s government lashed out at its critics — who had much to be critical about — and sought a rapprochement with Russia for economic and political reasons. This new alignment for Turkey

meant that its border — long used to resupply the rebels in northern Syria — had to close, substantially reducing the ability of the extremists in Aleppo. The Syrian government, which had waited four years, then moved with great force. It was the Turkish shift that allowed Mr. Assad to take Aleppo.

On January 5, Iraq's National Security Adviser met Mr. Assad in Damascus to discuss their mutual fight against the IS, just as Iraqi forces cleared the road from Haditha to al-Qa'im, which is on the Iraq-Syria border. These public meetings, a senior Egyptian military officer informs me, mirror the more private interactions between the militaries of Egypt, Iraq, Algeria and Syria. In November, Egyptian army officers went to Syria to re-establish connections that have frayed over the past few years. Now Egypt is ready to send 'peacekeepers' to help manage the ceasefire. Meanwhile, the Syrian and Turkish governments have met secretly in Algeria over the past five months to begin a conversation about the status of the Syrian Kurdish enclave on the Turkish border. Algeria is now openly talking about the restoration of legitimacy to the Assad government.

The end is far

The frustration of the extremists will not produce an easy end to this conflict. Harsh violence is the more expected outlet. Attacks in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey — all accused, rightly, of abandoning the uprising — will continue to be a serious problem. Iraq, already accustomed to violence since the illegal U.S. invasion in 2003, saw over 6,000 civilians killed last year alone. It is often strategically targeted against Shia neighbourhoods and religious places in order to deepen the trough of sectarianism. After a spate of attacks in Baghdad, Sunni leader Sheikh Mahdi al-Sumaidaie, the Grand Mufti of Iraq, made a plea on January 5 that echoes across the Arab world: "I confirm that Shias and Sunnis will meet and hold accountable all who betrayed, deceived and burned Iraq." It was a statement of patriotism out of desperation. This seam of patriotism will be hard for the extremists to rip apart.

North-west of Damascus is Souq Wadi Barada. The al-Fija spring there is a crucial source of water for the capital. Extremist groups have held this source for the past several years and on at least six previous occasions cut off the water supply to Damascus. The fall of Aleppo has led to new fighting in the area, with water now firmly cut off from all but one tank, which the military controls. Damascus faces great hardship. Negotiations are on to let the water flow again. When it does, it will show that reconciliation is possible in these societies.