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The battle for Aleppo or for regional hegemony?

Eastern Aleppo has been under government siege for more than four months, with international aid stocks exhausted and food supplies running low. In November, the Assad government, with substantial support from Russian airstrikes, has gained the upper hand. With the capture of the district of al-Shaar, the regime has captured the totality of the territory that rebels had gained in 2012. Syrian state television announced the 21st of December that the army had captured the districts of Karm al-Tahan and Myessar, and advanced into the Qadi Askar neighbourhood. The Russian defence ministry said governmental forces had also taken the district of Karm al-Katurji.

Only the intervention of Turkish forces had previously prevented the total collapse of rebel forces. However, the Russian government has subsequently reached out to the Turkish government with regards to the extent of Ankara's involvement. As the very first outcome, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu publicly announced in early December that his country and Russia wanted a cease-fire in Syria. Ankara and Moscow have long been at odds over the conflict in Syria, and the two countries still disagree over which elements of the Syrian opposition constitute terrorists. However, both Ankara and Moscow have a common enemy in DAESH and the Turkish government also believes that in absence of a political solution to the Syrian conflict that would guarantee territorial integrity. DAESH or other terrorist groups will continue to flourish.

In addition, Turkey seems to be backing a temporary ceasefire in Aleppo, a proposal on which the UN Security Council is preparing to vote. The UN text - drafted by Egypt, New Zealand and Spain – will be calling for a truce of at least seven days in Aleppo and humanitarian access to residents trapped by the fighting. France is also pushing for UN discussions: Paris called for an immediate UN Security Council session on the fighting, and an emergency meeting on the dire humanitarian crisis unfolding in Aleppo.

In a blow to the UN option, diplomatic sources argue that Russia and the US plan to hold talks in the coming days to determine the routes and timing for a total rebel withdrawal from eastern Aleppo, without a ceasefire. Rebel sources declared to the press that there is no intention to withdraw. It remains to be seen whether Moscow will use its veto in the council.

Although the Russian government appears as committed as ever to sustaining the Assad government, the military effort is scaling up hand in hand with military sales. However, the deployment has also thrown into sharp relief the limits of Moscow's conventional military. The Russian military had to deploy Soviet-era Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean, its first combat deployment ever. But the quarter-century-old Kuznetsov lacks the kind of powerful catapult system that is featured on US Navy carriers, and the its aircraft must take off from a ramp, with serious payload. Moscow already lost two fighter jets in crash landings on the carrier (something that is unfortunately normal with insufficient experience).

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