Syrian ethnic, sectarian conflicts deepen as US plots to install client regime

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Fighting intensified in the Syrian city of Aleppo over the weekend, with the government of President Bashar al-Assad deploying troops and aircraft to retake neighborhoods captured by opposition militants in a major offensive last week.

There were reports of heavy fighting in the historic city center and old fort areas of Aleppo, Syria's most populous city and its main commercial center. The BBC, which has a correspondent inside the city, reported that the Syrian army was shelling militia positions in the suburb of Salah al-Din, and that thousands of civilians are fleeing Aleppo.

While the rural districts around Aleppo have experienced frequent clashes between government forces and opposition militants during the sixteen-month civil conflict, the city had until recently seen relatively little violence. However, there have been a growing number of deadly attacks on government facilities and personnel in Aleppo this year, with anti-Assad fighters strengthened by increased weapons supplies flowing across the border from neighboring Turkey.

In response to the fighting in Aleppo, Sayda Abdulbaset Sayda, the leader of the US-backed Syrian National Council, urged the West and the Gulf monarchies to increase their support to the opposition militias. "We want weapons that would stop tanks and jet fighters," Sayda said during a visit to the United Arab Emirates.

Syria's foreign minister, Walid Moualem, stated Sunday that government troops would continue to reinforce Aleppo and other areas held by the opposition. Speaking during a visit to Iran, Syria's principal regional ally, Moualem claimed that while he backed the UN-sponsored ceasefire plan for Syria, the regime would continue to fight what he called a foreign-backed terrorist conspiracy.

The Gulf sheikhdoms, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have supplied millions of dollars worth of weapons to the Syrian opposition and pledged to pay salaries to "rebel" fighters. While Washington has claimed that it is providing "non-lethal" supplies to the opposition, such as night vision glasses and communications equipment, teams of CIA operatives are acknowledged to be working inside Turkey to coordinate the distribution of money and arms to the various militant groups.

Last week, CNN reported an increased presence of foreign opposition fighters, particularly from Libya, in and around Aleppo. The US cable news channel's correspondent in Syria, Ivan Watson, in a report to the "Amanpour" program on Friday, stated that foreign militants were being drawn to the Syrian conflict "because they see this as a jihad … as a fight for Sunni Muslims."

The United States and its allies are escalating their intervention in Syria despite growing concerns over the character of the Islamist forces they are supporting. Having stoked the conflict in Syria to the point of civil war, Washington now faces the prospect of an ethno-sectarian break-up of the country and the spread of fighting throughout the region.

A column in the *New York Times* Sunday, titled "Syria After the Fall," warned that while Washington has been happy to destabilize the Assad regime to weaken Iran's regional influence, the Syrian conflict threatens to set off a "chain of events" that could pose "a greater threat to the Middle East and to America's long-run interests in the region than does Iran's nuclear program."

"If the Syrian conflict explodes outward," the *Times* column says, "everyone will lose: it will spill into

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neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey. Lebanon and Iraq in particular are vulnerable; they, too, have sectarian and communal rivalries" connected to the fight between the Assad regime and the Sunni-dominated, US-backed opposition.

The piece, written by Vali Nasr, dean of the Johns Hopkins School of International Studies, warns that if Assad should fall from power, over 100 different opposition groups inside Syria would continue to fight for power with each other and with members of the Alawite, Shiite, Christian and Druze religious minorities, threatening to turn Syria into "a larger version of Lebanon in the 1970s … There would be ethnic cleansing, refugee floods, humanitarian disasters and opportunities for Al Qaeda."

The author advises that to avoid such a collapse, it is necessary for the US to foster a "power-sharing agreement" between elements of the opposition and members of the Assad regime.

The *New York Times*' modest proposal, which amounts to a call for a post-Assad regime comprised of Sunni Islamist forces and Syrian military brass, echoes the line now being advanced by the Obama administration. According to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, the US government is "discussing ways to place Syria's highest-ranking military defector [General Manaf Tlass] at the center of a political transition."

Gen. Tlass, until recently a senior commander of Assad's elite Republican Guard, defected to Turkey July 6 before traveling on to Paris with his family. He is currently engaged in a visit to Saudi Arabia, reportedly orchestrated by Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan.

Even if Washington could cobble together such a military-Islamist alliance to replace the current regime in Damascus, it would be no less brutal or reactionary than that of Assad. On the contrary, Washington would demand that its new client ruthlessly put down all opposition and impose US interests in Syria.

Adding further fuel to the explosive situation, an armed secessionist movement is spreading among Syria's Kurdish minority. The *Egypt Independent* reported Saturday that Kurdish fighters have overrun several Syrian army installations and raised the slogan, "Free Kurdistan."

Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters and the Kurdish Workers Party, which has waged a protracted struggle with the Turkish state, are reported to be sponsoring the militants in northeastern Syria.

The presence of a Kurdish rebellion against Assad further expresses the deeply divided character of the Syrian opposition. The Syrian National Council (SNC), though headed by an ethnic Kurd, is opposed to Kurdish secession. The Turkish government, which plays host to the SNC and the Free Syrian Army command, is deeply opposed to any demands for an independent Kurdish state, however.

Despite the danger to the lives of millions in Syria and throughout the Middle East, Washington and its allies are escalating their reckless proxy war. To this end, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta began a five-day tour of the Middle East Sunday, during which he will discuss joint plans for regime-change in Syria with the governments of key US allies Israel, Egypt and Jordan.

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