

Bloody fighting in Syria as US-backed forces slaughter prisoners

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US-backed forces opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad are stepping up their offensive in Aleppo, the country's largest city, amid reports Wednesday that the rebels had engaged in summary execution of dozens of captured loyalist police and soldiers. A gruesome video of one such slaughter was widely distributed on the Internet.

The scale of the fighting was shown in the reported storming of a police station at al-Marju in the Salhein district of Aleppo by a force of more than 700 "rebel" fighters. The 45-man security detachment inside resisted the attack fiercely until a large bomb was thrown into the building, killing at least 15 of the defenders. Most of the rest then surrendered.

One video showed four men, accused of being members of the pro-Assad Shabbiha militia force, lined up against a wall and forced to kneel, then mowed down with automatic weapons as their killers chanted "Allahu Akbar." The victims were said to be members of the Barri family, a clan linked to Assad through adherence to the Alawite religion, a branch of Shiite Islam.

In another video, from the al-Marju police station, showed a rebel desecrating the corpse of the station commander, blowing his head off.

Fighting raged across much of Aleppo Wednesday, as anti-Assad fighters overran three police stations while helicopter gunships roared overhead and carried out strikes against the rebels. Heavy shelling was reported in the Salaheddine district in the southwest part of the city, scene of some of the most violent clashes of the past week. Most residents have fled worst-hit districts of the city, with at least 200,000 refugees from the city of two million.

McClatchy News Service reported that the Assad regime was refraining from all-out destruction of

contested areas in Aleppo, in contrast to its approach in other cities such as Homs, one of the centers of the anti-Assad forces.

"We haven't seen the sort of intense shelling we've seen in other parts of the country," a representative of the US-aligned Human Rights Watch told McClatchy. "I think the government recognizes it has a lot of support in Aleppo."

Fear of the predominately Sunni-based opposition forces is particularly strong in the Christian minority, several hundred thousands strong in Aleppo. There have been numerous reports of religion-based ethnic cleansing in Syria, with Sunni insurgents killing or driving out Alawites and Christians, and pro-Assad forces targeting Sunnis.

The British daily *Guardian* carried a report from the Syrian-Iraqi border documenting the takeover of a border town by Al Qaeda fighters seeking to replace Assad with a Sunni fundamentalist regime.

NBC News reported that the anti-Assad forces have acquired some two dozen surface-to-air missiles, delivered to them through Turkey, the NATO ally of the United States where most of the rebels have their supply and training bases. Such missiles could play a key role in the increasingly militarized conflict with the Assad regime, which has deployed both fighter jets and helicopters to Aleppo.

There were unconfirmed reports of rebel units operating captured armored vehicles in the region between Aleppo and the Turkish border, about 30 miles north of the city, as well as pick-up trucks with heavy machine guns mounted on them.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar are reportedly spearheading the effort to supply the anti-Assad forces with heavy weaponry. However, this campaign also has enlisted the support of Turkey, which controls the supply lines,

and the United States, which is the ultimate source of the weaponry and must approve any transfer to the rebels.

The Turkish army staged tank exercises near the Syrian border Wednesday, the most provocative such action since the political crisis erupted in Syria 17 months ago. Some 25 tanks were deployed in the Nusaybin district of Mardin province, only a mile from the border crossing with the Syrian city of Qamishli. Turkey's Supreme Military Council began a four-day meeting Wednesday, bringing together Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and top military commanders.

The military muscle-flexing was directed not only at the Assad regime, but also against the fighters of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kurdish separatist guerrilla force that has waged sporadic warfare inside Turkey for over three decades. PKK fighters have begun operating openly on the streets of Kurdish-populated towns in the far northeastern region of Syria, after the Assad regime removed its troops to focus on defending areas more vital to maintaining its power—the capital city, Damascus, and the main business center, Aleppo.

Assad issued a written message to his troops on Tuesday, his first public statement since the July 18 terrorist bombing in Damascus that killed four of his top aides, including his brother-in-law. The statement declared, “The fate of our people and our nation, past, present and future, depends on this battle.”

In yet another step towards open intervention, the US government has approved fundraising for the Free Syrian Army, the main opposition military force, within the United States. The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control approved a license last week for a front organization called the Syrian Support Group “to engage in otherwise prohibited financial activities with the Free Syrian Army,” a spokesman announced Tuesday. The funds would go to the FSA to pay soldiers' salaries or buy weapons and other supplies.

The Obama administration's intentions were expressed in a front-page article in the *Washington Post* Wednesday, with the extraordinary headline, “For besieged Syrian dictator Assad, only exit may be body bag.” The article observed: “A growing consensus in Washington and in Middle East capitals now holds that Assad—a man once viewed as a moderate capable of reform—will be forced from power only by death or

capture.”

The newspaper noted that while US officials had suggested that a Yemen-style negotiated transfer of power had been considered possible as late as June, there was no longer any likelihood of such a course of action. Instead, Washington viewed Assad as a likely candidate for the fate of Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan ruler murdered by US-backed forces less than a year ago.

The *Post* article dovetails entirely with the grisly videos of summary executions in Aleppo. American imperialism is planning atrocities in Syria that would put the events in Libya in the shade, and dwarf the killings that have already taken place.



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