Historic city of Palmyra falls to Syrian government forces

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Syrian government forces retook the city of Palmyra from mercenaries affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Sunday, advancing on the city and retaking its historic ancient ruins under air cover from Russian war planes.

The Syrian military is preparing expanded military operations in the country's eastern desert region, including assaults against ISIS-held Raqqa and Deir al-Zor. The planned offensives will use Palmyra as a "launchpad," a Syrian general said Sunday.

These operations will inevitably raise the possibility of more direct clashes between US and Russian-backed proxies. The US military continues to pound both northern Syria and Iraq with air strikes, in support of large-scale ground offensives by US commandos and proxy militias.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by US air and ground units, are already engaged in fighting near Raqqa. On Sunday, US air forces conducted strikes against Manbij and Mar'a in Syria, and against al-Baghdadi, Kisik, Hit, Mosul, Qayyarah, Sinjar and Sultan Abdullah in Iraq.

The US political establishment is meanwhile torn by increasingly bitter divisions over a possible negotiated settlement with Russia. US Secretary of State John Kerry announced last week that US and Russian negotiators meeting in Moscow have agreed to initial terms for a deal to end the war. The transition to a postwar government could begin as early as August, Kerry claimed on Friday.

Appearing on CBS "Face the Nation" Sunday, Kerry reiterated his readiness to accept terms that would maintain some degree of Russian influence over the Syrian state. Russia "can help" the US stabilize the political and military situation in Syria, Kerry said.

"We have base access in Incirlik in Turkey. We have bases all through the Middle East and Bahrain and in Qatar. I see no threat whatsoever to the fact that Russia has some additional foundation into Syria," Kerry said Sunday.

"If Russia can help stabilize and provide for a peace process that actually ends this war," Kerry said, at which point he was interrupted by "Face the Nation" host John Dickerson.

"They're an ally in Syria?" Dickerson asked.

"No," Kerry replied, underscoring the fact that even the "peace" faction within the White House ultimately views the Russian government as its enemy.

The Syrian war is threatening to destabilize governments across Europe and the Middle East, Kerry said. The war is "putting existential pressure on Europe, as well as existential pressure on Jordan, on Lebanon and creating an environment that threatens Israel," he said, implying that these conditions justified a tactical compromise with Moscow.

Any US-Russian deal would be reached only because it serves the "strategic interest" of American imperialism, Kerry made clear. "If Russia can help us to actually effect this political transition, that is all to the strategic interest of the United States of America," he said.

Whatever its form, a diplomatic settlement stands little chance of containing the escalating chaos that has ravaged Syria's social infrastructure and killed as many as 470,000 civilians since the start of the US-fomented civil war in 2011. Five years of US destabilization operations have transformed Syria into a hotbed for Islamist extremists, with most of the country overrun by mercenary fighting groups that are armed and financed by the US and its regional allies.

Though theoretically controlled from Washington and Langley, these forces operate largely beyond the

control of their American handlers and engage in fighting against one another.

"Syrian militias armed by different parts of the US war machine have begun to fight each other on the plains between the besieged city of Aleppo and the Turkish border," the *Los Angeles Times* wrote on Sunday, in an unusually frank characterization of the contradictions unleashed by the Obama administration's Syria policy.

Clashes between "CIA-armed units" and "Pentagon-armed ones" in Syria have intensified to the level of full-on struggles over key territory. Pentagon-backed Syrian Democratic Forces seized the town of Marea from the CIA-backed "Knights of Righteousness" faction in February.

The clashes "highlight how little control US intelligence officers and military planners have over the groups they have financed and trained in the bitter five-year-old civil war," the *Times* noted.

In addition to showing the contradictions of the US intervention in Syria, the infighting among US-backed forces also expresses the deepening conflict within the US ruling elite and its European allies. Amid the media hyping of a possible peace deal and proclamations of "major victories" over ISIS in Mosul and Palmyra, military and political tensions are reaching new heights throughout the Middle East and within the imperialist governments themselves.

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