

US threatens Russia with end to cooperation in Syria as fighting rages in Aleppo

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US Secretary of State John Kerry warned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday that Washington could break off all bilateral cooperation with Moscow if fighting in Syria continues.

Kerry issued the threat as forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, with the support of Russian air power, launched a major offensive against Aleppo and reportedly seized control of areas in the centre of the city. Citing Syrian state television, RT reported that rebels had fled some districts and left behind heavy weaponry, but these reports were not verified.

In a telephone call with Lavrov, Kerry demanded Russia halt its support for the Syrian government's offensive and work to reimpose the September 9 ceasefire agreement. "We are working through steps that we might have to take to begin to suspend our engagement with Russia on Syria. We haven't taken those steps yet," State Department spokesman John Kirby commented when asked about Kerry's statement. "The message to the Foreign Minister [Russia] today was that we are perfectly willing and able to move forward on those steps that would end with the suspension of US-Russia bilateral engagement in Syria."

Although Kirby did not spell this out, the "suspension of US-Russia bilateral engagement" would presumably mean that not only the recently agreed ceasefire, but also the agreement reached last October to regulate safety protocols and communication between Russian aircraft and those of the US-led coalition ostensibly intervening against Islamic State would be scrapped. This would dramatically heighten the risk of a direct confrontation between Russian and US forces that could rapidly explode into all-out war.

Washington's ultimatum comes just days after diplomats, led by the US and Britain, seized on accusations of war crimes against Russia to step up pressure and pave the way to war. United States UN ambassador Samantha Power denounced Russia for "barbarism" at a Security Council meeting Sunday.

According to aid organizations, at least 400 people have been killed in Aleppo over the past week, including at least

96 children, and 1,700 injured. Russian aircraft have been accused of deploying bunker buster bombs. Two hospitals were reportedly hit yesterday in the latest raids.

Approximately 250,000 civilians are trapped in eastern Aleppo, with only 30 doctors to provide medical care. While they have been subjected to daily bombings by Russia and Syrian government forces, it has also been reported that the rebel militias, which are dominated in Aleppo by the Jihadi al-Nusra Front, have been preventing civilians from fleeing.

Lavrov reacted to Kerry's threat by attacking the US for its failure to separate the so-called moderate opposition militias from the al-Nusra Front, which was until recently the Syrian branch of al-Qaida. Al-Nusra makes up the vast majority of the rebel forces fighting in eastern Aleppo.

Kirby added menacingly, "Extremist groups will continue to exploit the vacuums that are there in Syria to expand their operations, which could include attacks against Russian interests, perhaps even Russian cities. Russia will continue to send people home in body bags, and will continue to lose resources, perhaps even aircraft."

This comment, together with a statement by the State Department that "non-diplomatic" options had been considered to end the fighting in Aleppo, has very ominous implications. US imperialism has a long record of collaboration with Islamist terrorists stretching back to the 1980s in Afghanistan against the Soviet invasion.

The US attempt to pose as a defender of the human rights of Syrians against Russian aggression and the September 9 ceasefire agreement is utterly cynical. The Obama administration used the peace deal to give the beleaguered opposition forces some respite and prepare a major escalation of the conflict. On September 17, the US air force targeted a Syrian army outpost near Deir ez-Zor, killing at least 60 soldiers, injuring more than 100 and enabling Islamic State fighters to seize the position. There are also widespread reports that the opposition forces, including the al-Nusra Front, were rearmed during the truce.

When fighting erupted in Aleppo following an attack on an aid convoy September 19, Washington and its allies blamed

Russia and the Syrian government for the assault, a claim which Moscow and Damascus have denied.

Human rights has been the pretext invariably invoked by US imperialism to justify a series of devastating military interventions over recent years. In 2011, the US and NATO used their alleged concern for the fate of Libyan civilians to legitimize a vast bombing campaign to overthrow the Gaddafi regime, culminating in the deaths of tens of thousands of Libyans, the brutal lynch-mob murder of Gaddafi and the plunging of the entire country into internecine conflicts between regional and religious groups.

The Syrian civil war, which is now more than five years old and has claimed the lives of close to half a million Syrians, was fomented by Washington and its allies, including by directly supporting Islamist extremists, to topple the Assad regime and install a pro-Western puppet in Damascus. This was part of the US' broader agenda of securing its unchallenged geopolitical dominance over the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia against its principal rivals, Russia and China—an agenda which has seen Washington wage one war after another for the past quarter century.

Russia responded last year with its own military intervention, aimed at propping up its main ally in the region and securing its only remaining military base outside of the former Soviet Union. The Kremlin's defense of the interests of Russia's wealthy oligarchy had nothing to do with a concern for the Syrian people, as the latest attacks once again demonstrate. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, far from stabilizing the situation, Russia's military operations and the nationalist bluster of the Putin regime only heightened the risk of a clash with US imperialism and its allies that could quickly spiral out of control and trigger a world war.

Significant sections of the political and military establishment in the US are prepared to risk all-out war with Russia in pursuit of their reckless plans for global hegemony, as indicated by the comments last week of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford. Dunford told Congress that controlling air space over Syria would require war with Russia.

The outcry over Russian war crimes is aimed at giving this aggressive war drive a veneer of "humanitarian" legitimacy. Pope Francis leant his voice to the campaign Wednesday, criticizing those responsible for the bombing in Aleppo in Rome. "I appeal to the consciences of those responsible for the bombings, who will one day will have to account to God," he said.

At a UN Security Council meeting yesterday, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon also attacked Russia and Syria, saying, "Those using ever more destructive weapons

know exactly what they are doing. They know they are committing war crimes."

French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault declared Wednesday that he is working towards a Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Aleppo, and warned that any country opposing it would be deemed complicit in war crimes.

The outrage of US and Western politicians over human rights violations in Syria is highly selective. A report from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights that rebel shelling led to the deaths of 49 children in July in western Aleppo has barely received a mention.

US imperialism has systematically stoked ethnic and religious tensions since the outset of the Syrian war with its backing for Kurdish separatist and Islamic extremist forces. In August, Washington endorsed Turkey's incursion into northern Syria to push back Kurdish control over a region on the Turkish border.

Over recent days, more information has come to light about the close relations between the US and its allies, and al-Nusra. German journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer conducted an interview in Aleppo with an al-Nusra commander, Abu Al Ezz, who stated that his organization was receiving US weapons through third countries. The commander went on to allege that "experts" from a number of countries, including the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Qatar, had been present in Syria to train al-Nusra fighters in the use of weaponry such as missile launchers.

Al-Nusra has been accused of repeated atrocities. In July, Amnesty International said it had carried out a wave of abductions, torture and summary executions in Idlib and Aleppo provinces. Other rebel groups involved in the war crimes included Ahrar al-Sham, Mureddin Zinki, the Levant Front and Division 16, some of which are backed directly by the US.



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