

US-backed Islamist rebels launch offensive in Syria

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US-backed Islamist rebels, dominated by the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front, launched a counteroffensive against Syrian government troops Friday in Aleppo.

The offensive was preceded by the indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas in government-controlled western Aleppo. Russian General Sergei Rudskoi reported that 43 civilians were killed and 96 wounded in the days prior to the offensive in rocket and mortar attacks.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported at least 115 people were killed and wounded on Friday alone. In one attack, rebels fired Grad missiles at al-Nayrab airport. Outside of Aleppo, an air base in Latakia where Russian aircraft operate from also came under rebel attack.

Making clear the central role being played by Al Qaeda-linked forces, a military spokesman for the Fastaqim faction told the Associated Press, “All the revolutionary factions, without exception, are participating in the battle.”

Charles Lister, a Syrian expert at the Middle East Institute in Washington, told the *New York Times* that 11 of the 20 groups involved in the offensive had been vetted by the CIA and provided with antitank missiles and other weaponry. He acknowledged that the American-supplied weapons were being used to carry out the bombardments, while Al-Nusra forces fought on the front line.

This did not stop the US and European media from generally reveling in the counteroffensive, with the *Washington Post* reporting breathlessly that, following a “smothering Syrian blockade and round the clock air strikes” aiming “to starve and shock rebel-held areas of Aleppo into surrender,” the “counterpunch” had now been launched. Only later did the article observe that the military action had been accompanied by “indiscriminate” shelling of civilian areas of western Aleppo.

Despite the new offensive, Russian President Vladimir

Putin refused a request by the military’s general staff to resume air strikes in eastern Aleppo. Russian and Syrian warplanes have observed a ten-day pause in the strikes, which they say is aimed at allowing civilians and militants to leave the city and bring in humanitarian supplies. Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, still sought to press for a deal with Washington by urging the US to separate “moderate” rebels from the extremist fighters. However, he added that Russia reserved the right to launch renewed attacks if the situation on the ground required it.

It is now clear that, as with the brief ceasefire in September, the US-backed rebels used the pause in fighting to regroup and prepare a counterattack.

Washington has no intention of retreating from its goal of regime change in Syria, which is part of its broader agenda to consolidate its hegemony over the energy-rich Middle East and sideline its chief rivals, above all Russia and China.

The anti-Russian campaign led by the US with charges of war crimes in Aleppo continues to gather pace. On Friday, The UN Human Rights Council narrowly voted to block Russia’s membership on the body. Western media outlets and politicians have been incessantly denouncing the Russian and Syrian governments for committing “war crimes” over recent weeks during their attacks on the Islamist positions in the east of Aleppo.

Washington’s hypocrisy over war crimes is staggering. It is in the process of leading an all-out assault on Iraq’s second largest city with an estimated civilian population of 1.5 million people. Officials from the UN and aid organizations have warned that the assault threatens to trigger the largest humanitarian catastrophe in recent times.

But in stark contrast to its denunciation of Russian and Syrian attacks on eastern Aleppo as war crimes, the shelling of civilians by US allies in Mosul is being hailed as a liberation and civilian casualties are being blamed on

unscrupulous ISIS fighters using residents as “human shields.” In reality, mounting reports indicate that there is a de facto collaboration in place between US-led forces in Iraq and the jihadi militants, who are being permitted to leave Mosul through a western route and cross the border into Syria to fight Assad.

At a meeting of Russian, Syrian and Iranian foreign ministers in Moscow yesterday, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem indicated that Russia could intervene militarily to cut off this escape route, telling the media, “I’m happy to hear from Mr. Lavrov the confirmation that we’ll prevent ISIL from reaching Raqqa.”

Were such an intervention to take place, it could serve as another flashpoint between Washington and Moscow.

Just how close the situation in Syria is to all-out war was revealed yesterday when the US military announced that American and Russian aircraft have repeatedly been involved in near misses during operations.

The chief of US Air Force Central Command, Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian, stated that on October 17, a US and a Russian jet flew within half a mile of each other in northwestern Syria. Both planes were flying at night and without lights. Harrigian added that such incidents were occurring approximately every ten days and had increased over the past six weeks since the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement reached by Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in September.

“It was close enough [so that] you could feel the jet wash of the plane passing by,” another US official said of the October 17 incident. The US pilot was unable to contact his Russian counterpart via radio, meaning the two sides only discussed the incident the following day.

This revelation underscores that Washington’s aggressive intervention into the Syrian civil war is on the verge of inciting a broader conflict. US imperialism, which initiated the five-year-old war with the aim of overthrowing the Russian-backed Assad regime in Damascus, leads a coalition of NATO allies, including Germany, France, Britain and Canada, all of whom have aircraft flying in the region.

For its part, Russia’s defensive intervention, aimed at propping up Assad, has seen Moscow deploy aircraft and advanced missile technology to the country, increasing the likelihood of a catastrophic conflagration. Even regional powers, such as Turkey, have conducted provocative air raids into northern Syria, prompting Damascus to issue a warning that further incursions by Turkish aircraft would lead to planes being shot down.

In a provocative statement that provided some indication of how tense relations have become, National Intelligence Director James Clapper said of Russia Tuesday, “I wouldn’t put it past them to shoot down an American aircraft if they felt that was threatening to their forces on the ground.”

The US sought to ratchet up tensions further Thursday, seizing on an alleged air strike on a school in Idlib province to pin the blame on either Russian or Syrian aircraft. White House spokesman Josh Earnest declared, “We don’t know yet that it was the Assad regime or the Russians that carried out the air strike, but we know it was one of the two. Even if it was the Assad regime that carried it out, the Assad regime is only in a position to carry out those kind of attacks because they are supported by the Russian government.”

UN humanitarian aid head Christopher O’Brien joined in, stating that 35 children had been killed and accusing Moscow of war crimes.

Predictably, nothing was said about the shelling of a school in government-controlled western Aleppo Thursday in which six children died.

The Russian Ministry of Defense responded by rejecting any involvement in the alleged attack in Idlib, posting pictures that appeared to show that no air strike had in fact been conducted and that the attack likely came from the ground. The photos showed no damage to the roof of the school and no craters in the area. Moscow called for an international investigation into the incident, a proposal ignored by the US and its allies.



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