

Moscow in secret talks with Syrian “rebels”

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Syrian “rebel” groups backed by the US, Turkey and other Western powers have entered into talks with Russia on brokering an end to the fighting in Aleppo, which was Syria’s largest city and commercial capital before being devastated in the US-orchestrated war for regime change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The talks in Ankara, first reported by the *Financial Times* of London, were reportedly brokered by the Turkish government and convened in the context of the increasingly decisive rout of the Islamist militias that have controlled parts of eastern Aleppo for the past four years and threatened to overrun the entire city as recently as last year.

Since last weekend, Syrian government troops, backed by Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and Shia militias from Iraq, have retaken some 40 percent of the territory previously occupied by the Islamists, whose strongest contingent is the group known as the Al Nusra Front, which served as Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate.

Tens of thousands of civilians have poured out of the eastern section of the city, seeking refuge from both intense bombardment by Syrian government warplanes and the terror exercised by Al Nusra and similar jihadist groups. While the Western powers claimed that there were 250,000 civilians trapped in the “rebel”-held area, based on the inflated claims made in relation to other areas retaken from the Islamists, many believe that only a fraction of this number had resided in the eastern zone.

According to the *Financial Times*, “While the secret talks are not the first time a rebel representative has met with the Russians, those familiar with the talks said it was the first time such a large number of opposition groups were involved.”

The *FT* article highlighted the implications of the talks in terms of the sidelining of Washington and the

increasingly evident debacle confronting the more than five-year-old US operation directed at arming, training and paying militias for the purpose of overthrowing Assad.

“The Russians and Turks are talking without the US now. It [Washington] is completely shut out of these talks, and doesn’t even know what’s going on in Ankara,” one unnamed opposition figure told the British daily.

Another opposition representative, asked why Moscow was attempting to reach a deal with the so-called rebels at this juncture, said that the Russian government was “essentially saying: ‘Screw you Americans.’”

The more likely motivation is the desire of the government of President Vladimir Putin to use ties with the armed opposition as a bargaining chip in its dealings with both Washington and the Assad government itself under conditions in which Russia’s intervention on the side of Damascus, which began 14 months ago, has apparently produced a decisive turning of the tide in the Syrian war.

The talks are indicative of closer relations between Ankara and Moscow, even as conflicting agendas in Syria and the wider region have led to intermittent frictions. Turkey sought a rapprochement with Russia earlier this year to break the tension caused by a November 2015 Turkish ambush and shooting down of a Russian warplane operating against Islamist militias in Syria near the Turkish border. Relations grew closer in the aftermath of the abortive July 15 military coup, which was widely blamed on the US.

Turkey’s own intervention into Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield, has been carried out with the tacit complicity of Russia, which controls much of Syrian airspace, even as the Assad government has denounced the Turkish incursion.

Tensions boiled to the surface after President Recep

Tayyip Erdogan made a statement Tuesday declaring that Turkey had sent its military into Syria “to bring justice.” It added, “We are there to end the rule of the cruel Assad, who has been spreading state terror.”

The statement prompted demands from Moscow for an “explanation.”

“The announcement really came as news to us,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. “It is a very serious statement and one which differs from previous ones and with our understanding of the situation. We hope that our Turkish partners will provide us with some kind of explanation about this.”

This was followed by a phone conversation Wednesday between Erdogan and Putin. On Thursday, Erdogan offered the “clarification” demanded by Moscow. “The aim of the Euphrates Shield Operation is no country or person but only terror organizations. No one should doubt this issue that we have uttered over and over, and no one should comment on it in another fashion or try to [misrepresent its meaning],” the Turkish president told a meeting of village chiefs assembled at the presidential palace in Ankara.

By “terror organizations,” Erdogan and his government have consistently made clear they mean not only the Islamic State (ISIS), but also the Syrian Kurdish militia, the YPG, which the US has funded, trained and armed, utilizing it as its principal proxy force against ISIS. The Pentagon has declined to provide Turkish troops with air cover because of Ankara’s determination to attack Washington’s Kurdish proxies.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu, meanwhile, met in Turkey’s Mediterranean resort city of Alanya Thursday, announcing that both countries are seeking to broker a truce in Aleppo and assure the provision of humanitarian assistance to its battered population.

Russia has proposed opening up four “humanitarian corridors” into eastern Aleppo to permit civilians to escape the besieged zone and allow food and medical aid in. Previous attempts to open up such corridors have broken down, however, as a result of the US-backed Islamist militias shelling them and firing upon civilians attempting to escape.

The US and its allies have denounced the Russian-backed offensive by the Syrian government, highlighting the humanitarian crisis in order to demand

an end to the attack on the Al Qaeda-linked militias that form the backbone of the Syrian “rebels.” The increasing hysteria of these denunciations reflects the fact that the fall of eastern Aleppo will deprive these militias of their last urban stronghold and consolidate Syrian government control over all of the country’s major population centers.



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