

Russia and China block UN resolution as Syrian army continues advance in Aleppo

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Syrian troops pressed ahead with their advance into eastern Aleppo Monday, continuing the rout of US-backed “rebel” groups. Reports indicate that Syrian government troops and Shia militias, including forces from Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, are now in control of two-thirds of the area formerly held by the Islamist forces opposing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Washington’s attempt to rely on Islamist proxy forces to carry out its regime-change operation in Syria is in disarray. While Secretary of State John Kerry was pushing last week for a deal to remove al-Nusra fighters from the city in exchange for an agreement on the part of Assad and Russia to let “moderate” so-called rebels remain, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov demanded Monday that all “rebel” fighters leave the city.

“Those armed groups that refuse to leave east Aleppo will be regarded as terrorists,” Lavrov declared. “We will treat them as such, as terrorists, as extremists, and will support a Syrian army operation against those criminal squads.”

The *New York Times* reported that US officials refused to confirm whether talks with Russia would begin in Geneva in the coming days on the withdrawal of the “rebels.” Indicating a sense of deepening crisis as the scale of the “rebel” defeat becomes ever clearer, the *Times* noted that Lavrov’s new demand appeared to have taken US officials by surprise.

Events on the ground are rapidly moving in the direction of a government victory in Aleppo. While reports Sunday indicated that government-aligned forces controlled 50 percent of eastern Aleppo, further gains were reported Monday. The rebel-held areas have been divided into enclaves during the three-week offensive, which has been accompanied by intense

bombing raids on the area by Russian and Syrian planes.

According to the latest estimates, these attacks have cost the lives of 320 civilians, including some 40 children. The “rebels,” for their part, have continued their indiscriminate shelling of government-held western Aleppo, killing 69 people during the same period.

Aid agencies report that 31,000 civilians have fled “rebel”-held territory.

On Monday, a hastily established field hospital to care for civilians fleeing the fighting was shelled by anti-Assad forces. Two Russian nurses were killed in the attack. A total of eight deaths were reported in government-controlled areas. Two airstrikes in Idlib province, likely carried out by Syrian or Russian planes, killed dozens.

Hoping to seize the advantage and push all “rebel” forces out of Aleppo, Russia, together with China, vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on Monday. The resolution, which was tabled by Spain, Egypt and New Zealand with the backing of the US, would have implemented an immediate seven-day cease-fire.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov declared the resolution to be a “provocation,” pointing out that all previous cease-fires had been used by the “rebels,” who are dominated by the Al Qaeda-linked affiliates of the al-Nusra Front, to regroup and obtain new supplies of weapons from the US and the Gulf sheikdoms. This was the outcome of the brief cease-fire agreed to by Russia and the US in September. The truce was broken when US aircraft bombed Syrian army positions less than a week after it came into force.

Predictably, the US and its allies responded to Moscow and Beijing’s vote by denouncing Russia and Syria for human rights violations. White House Press

Secretary Josh Earnest stated that the Syrian and Russian attacks were “disgraceful.”

The level of hypocrisy in such statements is breathtaking. Moscow’s chief goal is to prop up the Assad regime, its most important ally in the Middle East and host to its sole military base outside of the former Soviet Union. But the casualties caused by Syrian and Russian attacks pale in comparison to the atrocities committed by US imperialism.

The US is playing a decisive role in the brutal offensive being waged on the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, where upwards of 1.5 million civilians are trapped amid sustained assaults on residential areas. US politicians and the media have sought to prepare public opinion for large numbers of civilian casualties in Mosul by placing all of the blame on Islamic State fighters. But the US-backed offensive by the Iraqi army, Kurdish Peshmerga and other militias has left an unknown number of civilians dead, caused tens of thousands to flee, and disrupted water and utility supplies to eastern districts of Mosul. There have also been reports of sectarian atrocities against the local Sunni population.

The United States bears principal responsibility for the violence that has engulfed Iraq and Syria, costing the lives of millions. Not only did Washington foment the 2011 civil war with the aim of engineering regime change in Damascus, it has waged virtually uninterrupted war in the region for two decades, with the aim of consolidating its hegemony over the energy-rich region.

The appointment by President-elect Donald Trump of a cabinet dominated by former military generals and aggressive proponents of US militarism demonstrates that this policy will only be intensified under the incoming administration.

While Trump has yet to lay out a Syrian strategy, his appointments of retired General James Mattis to the position of defense secretary and Michael Flynn as national security adviser point to a shift in policy. Both have criticized Obama’s reliance on “rebel” groups, and Mattis has called for a congressional resolution authorizing the deployment of US ground troops if necessary against the Islamic State, which still controls significant portions of Syria.

The routing of the US-backed Islamist forces in Aleppo is encouraging the European imperialist powers

to advance an alternative solution to the conflict. A report in the *Times* of London suggests that the debacle of US policy in Syria has prompted the European Union to propose its own initiative. According to the *Times*’ report, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini proposed at a meeting with Syrian opposition forces two weeks ago that Brussels could accept Assad remaining in power if he agreed to grant control of regions of the country to the “rebels.” Brussels would provide financial assistance to facilitate such an arrangement, Mogherini reportedly added. The *Times* suggested that this was part of a last-ditch effort to ensure Western influence over Syria in the aftermath of the civil war.

“What Mogherini wanted to do was present an EU plan—this is how to solve the conflict,” a source linked to the Syrian opposition stated. “... In return, if all sides agree and everyone does what the EU says, there’s a huge pot of money.”

This only underscores the increasingly explosive character of the Syrian crisis, which is deepening the rivalries between the imperialist powers as they seek to pursue their geostrategic interests with ever more open hostility. Leading European politicians reacted to the election of Trump last month by insisting that Europe had to act with greater independence from the United States and even challenge it in areas where their interests collide.

EU diplomats confirmed the outline of the proposals reported by the *Times*. With the US strategy of backing an Islamist insurgency against Assad apparently headed to defeat, the EU is pushing a plan for the sectarian partition of Syria along regional lines, with the competing governments propped up by European capital.



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