

US-backed Islamist militias abandon Aleppo's old city as Syrian army advances

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Syrian government troops, backed by Russian, Iranian, Iraqi Shiite and Hezbollah forces, continued their advance through areas of Aleppo held by US-backed Islamist opposition militias yesterday, forcing the “rebel” troops to abandon much of the old city.

Syrian army units have re-taken the al-Shaar area and old city neighborhoods including Agheour, al-Farafrah, and Bab al-Hadeed. Islamist militias reportedly abandoned large networks of tunnels in the old city, which they could have used to carry out hit-and-run attacks to delay the advance of Syrian army forces, without a fight. Only small pockets of the old city are still under opposition control, and the Syrian army now reportedly controls three-quarters of the city.

Russian sources also reported that Syrian army troops had seized a fortified medical facility in the Balalat neighborhood held by the opposition, which used it to shell traffic on nearby highways and residential areas in government-held western Aleppo. They claimed that 85 percent of eastern Aleppo, previously held by the opposition, was now in the Syrian regime's hands.

The opposition forces asked the Syrian army for a five-day cease-fire to transport civilians in east Aleppo to other opposition-held areas. However, the Syrian government stated that it would reject any such request as long as “terrorist organizations” did not leave the city—referring to the links between opposition militias and the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat Fatah al-Sham group, previously known as the Al Nusra Front.

The situation facing the opposition is increasingly desperate, and reports are emerging that the US government and its NATO allies are pressing the opposition militias to evacuate Aleppo to continue the war elsewhere.

“The Americans asked us if we wanted to stay or to leave, we told them that this is our city and that we will

defend it,” Zakaria Malhifji, a leader of the Fastakim militia that is part of the US-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), told *Le Figaro*, which commented: “The fall of east Aleppo could be a matter of days. Insurgent strongholds are falling the one after the other.”

Russian state media reported yesterday that ten opposition fighters had surrendered to the Syrian army in order to benefit from an amnesty offered by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. However, bitter fighting is continuing in Aleppo, as pro-Assad and opposition forces deploy artillery and other heavy weapons inside the city.

Syrian state media reported that at least twelve civilians were killed and 64 wounded in artillery and rocket attacks by opposition forces on regime-held residential neighborhoods. That death toll is expected to rise. Colonel Ruslan Galitsky, a Russian military advisor fighting with Assads forces, and two female Russian medics, Nadezhda Durachenko and Galina Mikhaylova, also died from injuries sustained during opposition mortar attacks.

Fifteen people, including one child, died Tuesday in opposition-held east Aleppo, amid intense bombardments by the Syrian regime and its allies.

Approximately 100,000 civilians are now reportedly trapped in the handful of neighborhoods still under opposition control, after at least 80,000 managed to flee to government-held areas of Aleppo.

“We have suffered a lot. We've been deprived of food—the amount of bread we were being given wasn't enough to feed my family. ... My vision has been affected by the lack of food,” a man in his sixties said as he arrived in government-held areas from east Aleppo. In opposition-held areas, he reported, his family received one loaf of bread for every two people every three days.

The leading imperialist powers intervened yesterday, as the situation for their proxies in Aleppo became increasingly desperate, issuing a joint call for an immediate ceasefire. The United States, Germany, Britain, Canada, France, and Italy denounced Russia and Syria, threatening individuals and forces involved in Syrian army's Aleppo offensive with sanctions and war crimes charges. "The images of dying children are heartbreaking," they wrote, condemning "the actions of the Syrian regime and its foreign backers, especially Russia, for their obstruction of humanitarian aid."

In fact, it is precisely these powers that bear the primary responsibility for the carnage in Aleppo, having overseen the supplying of billions of dollars' worth of weapons to their Islamist proxies over five years of war in Syria. The hypocrisy of their threats of war crimes charges is underscored by the fact that they are allied with Iranian and Iraqi Shiite forces in the current bloody offensive against Mosul in nearby Iraq.

Aleppo and its industrial and commercial base was a target of looting by the Islamist opposition starting in the early years of the Syrian war. It since evolved into a strategic center from which the NATO powers re-supplied their opposition proxies across northern Syria. Now NATO is desperate, since the recapture of Aleppo by Assad would deal a major, potentially decisive blow to their logistical support to the Islamist opposition.

They fear that Donald Trump's election and the defeat of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who advanced an aggressively pro-war and anti-Russian stance on Syria, could disrupt the war, by presenting Trump with an opposition defeat as a *fait accompli* on his inauguration in January.

"The rebels foolishly depended on Hillary Clinton's assurances to hang on until she came into power. They had no plan B for a Clinton defeat. Conversely, the Russians understand that they have to finish off east Aleppo by the time Donald Trump is inaugurated. With the Old City fallen, the task is almost complete," wrote the pro-opposition *Middle East Eye*.

In the meantime, there are multiple, competing attempts by NATO powers to negotiate a truce with Russia, the Assad regime, and their allies in Aleppo. US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in Hamburg yesterday to discuss the fighting in Aleppo. Initial

reports on their meeting suggest that they failed to reach an agreement.

"I confirm the support to the US initiative of December 2," Lavrov said in response to a question by an American reporter. However, the Obama administration withdrew the plan it issued on December 2, three days later, and Moscow objects to the proposal Washington issued subsequently, fearing it gives too much freedom of movement to Al Qaeda-linked forces in the opposition.

At the same time, Russian and Turkish officials are also trying to negotiate a ceasefire in Aleppo, according to statements yesterday from Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, who had traveled to Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin the day before.

"We are doing everything possible to bring about discussions between opposition representatives and Russia and have achieved success on this topic," Yildirim told Interfax. "If any consensus reached is turned into a signed document, then that would be to everyone's benefit. ... Now is the time when you need to get results."

The *Washington Post* criticized the Russian-Turkish talks, complaining that "Moscow has tried to sideline Washington's efforts by sending representatives for talks with rebel officials in Turkey."



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