

Syrian government retakes eastern Aleppo

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An agreement brokered by the governments of Russia and Turkey to evacuate remaining Islamist militia members and a relatively small number of civilians from the last remaining neighborhood of eastern Aleppo under “rebel” control appeared on Tuesday to have ended four years of fighting in what was previously Syria’s largest city and its commercial capital.

The fall of eastern Aleppo to Syrian government forces, backed by Russian airpower and Shia militias aligned with Iran, marks a turning point in the more than five-year-old war for regime change that was orchestrated by Washington and its regional allies. The enclave within the northern Syrian city represented the last significant population center under “rebel” control.

It also represents a debacle for the US and the other Western powers, along with Saudi Arabia and the other reactionary Sunni oil monarchies, which poured in billions of dollars of arms and funding for the Islamist militias, while funneling in tens of thousands of jihadist fighters from across the Middle East, Europe and beyond to ravage Syria.

This strategic setback for the US imperialist intervention in Syria has exacerbated the bitter internecine conflicts within the US ruling establishment over US foreign policy and particularly Washington’s war drive against Russia in the run-up to Donald Trump’s inauguration as US president next month. Trump had insisted during his presidential campaign that the US should ally itself more closely with Moscow in combating “terrorism” in Syria, a policy strongly opposed by top echelons within the Pentagon and CIA.

The bitter frustration of Washington and its allies was evident Tuesday at an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council in which the US, Britain and France denounced the Syrian government and Russia for alleged atrocities in Aleppo. Unconfirmed reports from the city have cited incidents in which pro-government militias have summarily executed prisoners, including civilians, while the death toll from aerial and artillery bombardment has continued to mount.

Both the Syrian government and Russia have denied the reports of massacres, charging that the Western-backed “rebels” had fired on civilians attempting to flee their zones of control and had attempted to use the population as “human shields.”

When the jihadist militias overran the same areas of eastern Aleppo in 2012 and carried out their own summary executions, it should be recalled, these same Western governments remained silent, while the Western media justified these killings by referring to the victims as supporters of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

The US ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, gave the most inflammatory speech to the Council, demanding of Russia whether it was “literally incapable of shame.” She went on to declare that the siege of eastern Aleppo would join “those events in world history that define modern evil, that stain our conscience decades later--Halabja, Rwanda, Srebrenica and now Aleppo.” Predictably, she left out war crimes carried out by US imperialism and its allies in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Gaza and elsewhere.

Even as Power and her British and French counterparts were railing against Moscow and the Assad government, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin reported that over the previous hour “military activities in east Aleppo have stopped,” and that the Syrian government had consolidated its control over all of Aleppo. He added that an agreement had been reached to evacuate the remaining “rebels” from the city to the western province of Idlib.

This agreement was confirmed by both the Turkish government and by representatives of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki militia. This Islamist outfit was one of the main so-called “moderate” factions backed by the US, backing that included the provision of TOW anti-tank missiles. It gained international notoriety last July when its members posted a video of themselves beheading a wounded 12-year-old Palestinian boy.

At least half of the so-called rebels in Aleppo were made up of the Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s main affiliate in Syria, and the Ahrar al-Sham, another Al Qaeda-linked

militia which has been designated by the United Nations as a terrorist organization. This latter group also confirmed the ceasefire.

The evacuation agreement was reportedly brokered between the Russian military and Turkish intelligence, with Washington apparently playing no role in the resolution of the crisis in Aleppo. The US had repeatedly blown up previous negotiations with Russia on reaching a cease-fire in the city because of its determination to rescue the Al Qaeda-linked forces upon which its efforts toward regime change have rested. The State Department was compelled to acknowledge Tuesday that it had received no advance notice of the Russian-Turkish agreement, underscoring the crisis gripping US policy in the region.

The speed with which the Islamist forces have collapsed appears to have taken Washington and their other Western and regional state patrons by surprise. In part this was due to ferocity of the Syrian government assault on eastern Aleppo, but it is also attributable to divisions among the various factions that make up the “rebels,” which as recently as last month erupted into armed clashes between them over control and influence.

While the Western governments and media routinely accuse the Assad government of “massacring its own people” and blame it for all of the hundreds of thousands who have died since the war for regime change began in 2011, a report issued by the anti-government Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Tuesday presents a different story.

According to its documented count, 312,000 people have died since the war began. Of these, Syrian government troops and pro-regime militias accounted for 110,000 of the dead. The toll also includes 53,000 members of Syrian anti-government militias and over 54,000 foreign jihadis. The number of civilians killed, according to the group’s report, is 90,000. These figures paint a very different picture than the propaganda narrative advanced by Washington and the various supporters of “human rights” imperialism. It is of a country that has been decimated by imperialist intervention.

This rape of Syria is not about to end. “Even if it is the end of the of the siege in Aleppo, it is not the end of the war in Syria. It will go on,” State Department spokesman John Kirby told reporters in Washington.

Similarly, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, the foreign minister of Qatar, a principal backer of the “rebels,” told *Al Jazeera*: “If Aleppo falls into the

government, into the regime’s hands, this will be the end of the war? I don’t think so. We believe that the Syrian people and the Syrian opposition are willing to resist, and to continue their efforts. This will not end the war.”

For its part, the Obama administration, barely one month before it leaves office, has ordered another 200 US special operations troops into Syria, joining 300 on the ground there, ostensibly to prepare Kurdish and allied militias to retake Raqqa, the so-called capital of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria.

And last week, Obama ordered a waiver of the US Arms Export Control Act with relation to “foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in supporting or facilitating ongoing US military operations to counter terrorism in Syria.” The presidential directive sets the stage for a major escalation of the US arms flow into Syria.

While the initial beneficiaries are the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-dominated militias that serves as the main proxy force in the US-backed offensive against Raqqa, the same ruling can be used to turn on the CIA spigot once again of US arms to Al Qaeda-linked forces fighting the Syrian government.

The fall of Aleppo raises the prospect of the Syrian government, backed by Russia, turning its own attention to Raqqa, even as Turkey’s intervention into Syria, ostensibly to combat ISIS, but largely in opposition to Washington’s Kurdish proxies, has already severely complicated the US offensive. A Russian-backed Syrian drive against the city would raise the real threat of a clash between the world’s two largest nuclear powers.



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